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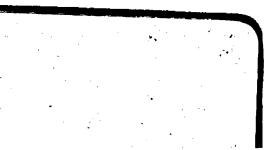
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STORM
AND
CALM ON THE DOWNS







STORM AND CALM ON THE DOWNS.



STORM AND CALM ON THE DOWNS.

BY

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“WESTFIELD VILLAGE,” AND “A LAND AND SEA STORY.”

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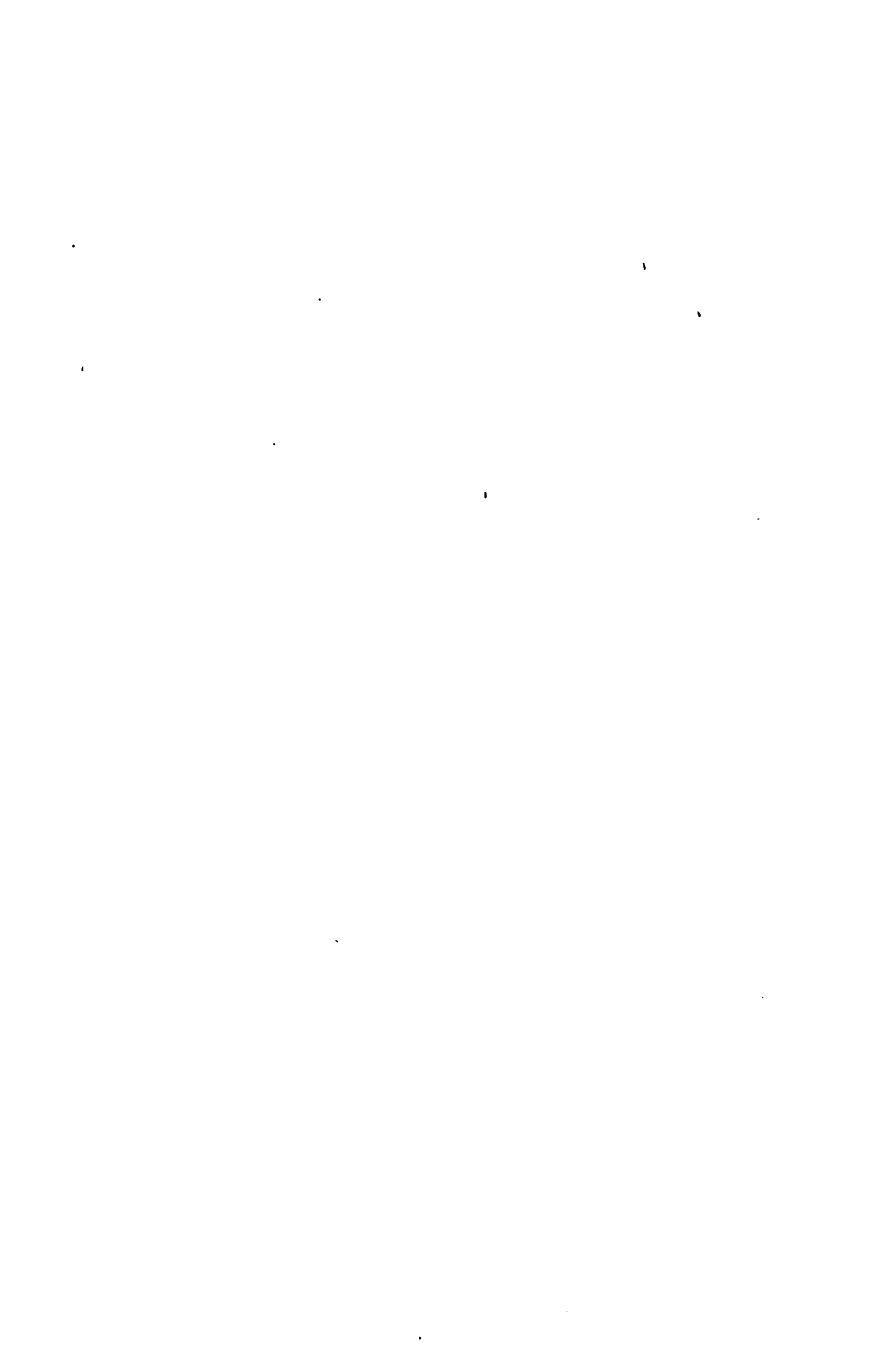
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1884.

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TO ALL THOSE WITH WHOM
IN TIMES PAST
I HAVE WANDERED OVER THE DOWNS,
THIS STORY
IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.



P R E F A C E.

It was with a desire to represent some of the scenery of the South Downs, and to recall some of their associations, that this story was commenced. If some of the sentiments expressed in it should be considered unsuitable to an age of rapidity and progress, they arise from the fear that with all our advance in knowledge, there are some serious errors in the present mode of education, which do not lead to a growth in that true wisdom which is expressed in the words :

“ And unto man He said, Behold the fear of the Lord that is wisdom, and to depart from evil that is understanding.”

CHAPTER I.

A NEW HOME.

“AND how soon do you expect this little lady to come, Matthew?”

“Well, you know my dear, the train reaches Ashpole at half-past seven, and there is above an hour’s drive here after that, so you must expect her a little before nine, I suppose. But whether she is little or tall, I cannot say.”

“But you have seen her.”

“Yes; but that was three years ago, when she was between thirteen and fourteen, and a girl alters and grows up so much in such a time.”

“O dear! I hope she won’t be a tall, fashionable young lady, looking down upon her old country cousins, and wanting constant amusement and novelties. I am sure I cannot get on with that.”

“Nay, my dear, do not condemn her beforehand; she was a nice bright, pleasant looking little thing then, but she may be very plain, or she may

have grown up into a very fine looking girl. I daresay she feels very shy at coming here."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Erle, rather sadly, "but I am sure I feel more shy at her coming."

"At your age, my dear!" said her husband, good naturedly. "But do remember she is a friendless girl; and let us hope she will soon feel the advantage of a home where people are ready to be kind to her, and to make her welcome."

"Ah, Matthew! but even with the best intentions, that does not make people suit. After all the years we have spent alone together, it seems rather a doubtful kind of experiment to begin now with a third. We've been 'Darby and Joan' together for such a long piece of our lives."

Mrs. Erle did not look as if it had been a very unhappy portion, and her husband answered fondly, "Yes, my Joan, and what better could I wish for? but the girl seems as if she were put into our hands, as I am her guardian, and she is now left entirely alone. So I wish to try the experiment, and if she does not like it, and desires to leave us for another kind of life after a year or two, we are but as we were before; if she takes to us, and likes to stay, there may be the happiness of a young life to brighten our own, when we are getting farther and faster down hill." For the good man looked to

the future, "Letty is but weakly, and if I was taken from her, she would be alone, and I should be glad to have some younger, stronger person who would care for her."

"Very well, my dear," she said, in rather a plaintive voice, "you settled it in rather a hurry, but of course we must keep to it as you wish. But you know, I have always said, I was afraid a girl would find nothing suitable to her tastes in this out-of-the-way place. There's no amusement to be had, there's not another girl for a companion for miles round, except at Farmer Wray's; there's nothing for a young person to see or to do, and she'll find it frightfully dull being with two old folks. Her tastes cannot be like ours, you can't expect a young thing to like just what satisfies you and me."

"Quite true, Letty, but we must consult her tastes a little ourselves, we must meet half-way; we must be prepared to give up a little on our side, as well as she on hers."

Mr. Erle knew very well that his wife did not like being disturbed in her usual routine of household and parish affairs, so he added, "After all, she needn't be on your hands all day; if she has any brains, there's the library for her, and she can also read to you sometimes if she likes."

"Ah, well!" said good Mrs. Erle in rather a despairing tone, "I'm afraid I've no genius with girls."

"I like girls," he said, "now if it were the boy, I should have more scruple, for they said he was idle and unmanageable at school, and yet, though he is bent on getting into the army, he will not work for it. But if he does well at Sandhurst, there won't be any need to trouble much about him, though we must have him sometimes."

"What is *his* name; as queer as hers?"

"Oh no; he is only plain 'John:' but her name came about as poor Sherbrook being killed at the crossing of the Alma, his poor wife seeking to find a name for the fatherless babe born ten days after the battle, pitched upon this as a standing memorial of her loss."

"Dick Sherbrook was but a foolish fellow, wasn't he?"

"Oh yes, foolish perhaps in his marriage; and then wild and rash in enlisting afterwards, because he had nothing to live upon; though he might soon have got up if he had lived, I daresay. But I was very sorry for poor pretty little Kitty Sherbrook, who left her two little orphans alone in the world, before she was twenty-five."

"Then you think we ought to have had them before?"

"No, Letty; I don't think it was a question while the grandparents were alive. But now, you see, I am their nearest relation, as well as her guardian, so that I do think it is a duty at least to try with the girl; and as I said, I like girls," he ended, going to the door.

After her husband had been called out to speak to a neighbour, Mrs. Erle fussed and fidgetted about putting the room tidy, and wondered if her shabby, quiet gown was nice enough for the young lady fresh from school and full of the newest fashions.

They were a quiet elderly couple, who had never had any children, and were all in all to each other. Mrs. Erle rather hung back from the idea of the new inmate, yet she knew what her husband's last remark meant; how his thoughts had gone back to the one sister of his name, who had died when just entering into womanhood, and she allowed,—“Ah, yes! if all girls were like poor Sophy, I should have no fear.

“My heart quite jumped,” as Mrs. Erle said, when at last the door bell rang, and she looked out into the evening darkness. A pleasant voice and a hearty shake of the hand that met her at the

doorway, sounded to Alma Sherbrook like a welcome to her new home. She was tired by the long railway journey, and felt quite dazzled and bewildered as she entered the comfortable little parlour of Ivyton Vicarage. It was, however, a pair of very pleasant-looking eyes that glanced at her, and accompanied the greeting of the cold, quivering hand which Mrs. Erle held out to her; a few friendly words followed, though in rather a constrained tone, and the next minute the strange young lady was taken to her own room, with an apology for its smallness, as "country vicarages did not contain much spare room." A slight remark and a gay-sounding laugh from Alma very soon put Mrs. Erle more at her ease; and as she went downstairs she remarked to her husband, "Well, my dear, I will allow I don't think the child looks at all fine."

A month had passed, and Alma was beginning to get somewhat used to her new home. It was a little dull, to be sure, to be without any of her school companions to laugh and talk with over every trifle, but on the whole she liked the change very well. The elderly couple were very kind to her, and though the breakfast was rather silent, and the early dinner rather stiff and formal,

especially on days when Mr. Erle happened to be away, and Mrs. Erle was apt to be somewhat lengthy and prosy in her oft-repeated anecdotes, there was yet some comfort in a more settled life, and in the feeling of a home such as she had not known since her early childhood. After her mother's death, she had been handed about from one relation to another, till she was old enough to go to school; when her holidays had often been spent with her grandparents, who indulged and petted the little orphan for their own pleasure, while she ran about half wild with her brother and other boys: unless when some distant relation kindly took compassion on her, and took her for a long visit.

The change to a free country life, from one which had been spent mainly at school in a large town, was naturally delightful to a girl with good health and a flow of cheerful spirits. It was all like a new world to Alma Sherbrook; for it was like a voyage of discovery when first she made her way up to the breezy downs, and gazed with a beating heart at the distant stripe of silver sea trembling in the sunshine, when she wandered along the open green roadways winding at the foot of a slope, or between the thick tangled hedges, rich with blossom and berry. The noise of rooks when she opened her window in the early morning, the swallows

darting to and fro, and chasing the insects round the fir trees, the butterflies, the dragonflies, the hum of bees in the limes,—the dewy gossamers woven among the clumps of gorse, the distant tinkle of sheep bells,—all gave to her a feeling of rest and home-life such as she had never before experienced. Almost as far back as she could remember, her life had been spent so much at school that there was no place to which she was especially attached. Nor had she many friends with whom she was ever really intimate.

There was one person whom she loved above all others, and that was her brother. They had not been much together, but those occasions had made bright and happy spots in the monotony of the years, and in her eyes he was almost a hero, with his mischievous pranks and merry ways.

How Alma should like her new relations, her old-fashioned cousins, was a question upon which she had many anxious reflections. They were very kind, but everything was different from what she had been used to. After a few days of acquaintance, the title of 'Miss Sherbrook' was dropped by mutual consent, and Mr. Erle suggested that as he and his wife were such old cousins, they should be addressed as 'Uncle and Aunt.' Alma coloured, and made no answer; however, Mr. Erle carried

his point, though he thought the girl did not like it. 'It recognizes a position of more authority over her,' he thought, 'and it binds the child to us all the more. He then said to her, in a very friendly way, "we hope you have come to pay us a very long visit, and that you may be very happy here with us; at the end of that time we may see if we want to talk of any other plans."

So Alma was introduced into her new life by Mr. Erle; he began by taking her many long and pleasant walks round the scattered set of cottages that made up the small country parish of Ivyton, in the course of which they became more acquainted with each other. She was also introduced to the old and young women, to the babies and innumerable small children that swarmed in all directions. "You must learn to know them, and help me with them, my dear; a young person is such a valuable assistant to us old ones," said Mr. Erle, good naturedly. Alma said she liked children, though she did not know how she could manage teaching them.

"And so you are come to pay us a long visit, miss," said a poor old woman who lived near the farthest end of the parish. "It will be nice for the parson and his lady to have a young miss to live with them. I always thought they seemed a

little lonesome like, and I hope you'll stop for good and all."

"Thank you; I don't know. Do you live by yourself?"

"Yes, miss. I've got this little bit of a room, and as much as I can do it is to keep that tidy, for I've to muddle about on my knees, I'm that lame. The neighbours on both sides are very kind to me, and bring my things, else I'd starve; for I've nobody belonging to me."

"How do you live then?"

"A bit from the parish, and a bit from my garden; and the farmer lets me stop, as I worked for him and his father nigh on fifty years. I shall like to see your face, young miss," she said, with an attempt at a curtsy, as Alma left the room.

Mr. Erle went to the door of another cottage. "Well Mrs. Bates, how are you and your young folks. Are you getting strong again?"

"Yes, thank ye, sir," said a lean worn-looking woman, surrounded by a number of young children, "only baby's teething, and Nelly's had fits."

"Are they better now?"

"Yes, sir, quite well now."

"Then why haven't you sent any of the children to school for so many weeks?"

"Oh! I beg pardon, sir, but they've no shoes fit to go in."

Mr. Erle looked down at a number of little feet; it was truly the case that some of them were nearly shoeless. "But the weather has been very dry, Mrs. Bates, you might have sent those who could come. Besides, I am sure at least half your money for the shoe club ought to have been paid up by this time, and if you had mentioned it perhaps——

Mrs. Bates rocked the crying baby backwards and forwards, and said uneasily, "Well, a little, sir; but you see my husband is not in full work."

"Yes, I know he has been laid up for a week or two with rheumatism, which he caught in doing what he ought not. Why is he out looking after Farmer Wray's rabbits so many of these nights, eh?"

Mrs. Bates curtsied and see-sawed the baby about still harder, and at last stammered out, "You see, sir, we've so many mouths."

"Yes, I *do* see; but isn't that all the more reason your husband should work honestly to provide for them. If he would leave off poaching, he might be in constant work. But who will care to employ a dishonest man? However, send up the three biggest children to the Vicarage to-

morrow, and Mrs. Erle will see to their shoes. Only send them to school, and you must pay when you can. Good morning."

Mrs. Bates was profuse in thanks and curtsies, as the Vicar walked out of the door.

"If only she will send the children," said he. "But she is not a very trustworthy person. I think I shall have to put the little ones under your charge, Alma, to see that they come to school," said he, turning to her pleasantly.

The next cottage contained a poor old couple, who lived on their parish pay, and upon such additions as they could get from hop-picking and harvesting; but they were very cheerful, and the old man toddled off with his two sticks into his garden, to tell the parson the history of all his plants, and of his bees, and of the pig which Farmer Wray would sell for him at market, and which he hoped would bring him in a pound or two.

Alma thought they were very poor rough people, and very ignorant; no doubt they were in some ways; but there might be something to do amongst them.

He brought her out to a hollow near the top of the downs, and led the way to a seat cut in the turf. "Now, look round, and see if you don't think this worth something."

"Indeed, it is," said Alma, as she looked down the smooth shaven slope, curving into a deep green cup, in the bottom of which were nestled a few cottages, surrounded by elm trees in their spring beauty, rejoicing in the sunshine of April; while high above the bare shoulder of down rose against the clear blue sky, and the rooks and a stray kite hovered overhead, as if basking in the warmth and sunshine. "I used often to come up here with Aunt Letty, to refresh ourselves with the beauty of a day like this."

"Was she fond of coming up here?" asked Alma.

"Yes, very; for even Aunt Letty and I were young once," he said, with a half-amused smile. "I used to bring my books, and she would bring her work, and we spent many an hour up here. Then sometimes I would make my sermon, walking up and down on this little terrace; it always seemed to me, out in the open air, and watching their work in the fields below, and looking into something of the life they led, I could speak more truly to the hearts and feelings of the people I met in church every Sunday, helped by having taken in so much of the beauty, and purity, and wondrousness of the earth, with which they were so familiar."

Then he turned round, and pointed out the distant rising town on the sea shore, adding, "At that time it was only a fishing village, and I suppose I knew by sight most of the families who came to the seaside houses. I have known them come up to the downs summer after summer, some on ponies, and some on donkeys—ladies, gentlemen, and children—spending the whole afternoon strolling about, or sketching, or simply enjoying the lovely scene; while the children played about, or hunted for nests in the furze bushes, or gathered bunches of the wild flowers that grew up here. There was one set so familiar to me, that I felt as if I must take off my hat to them, though I did not even know their names. That was the way in which people enjoyed the sea in those quiet times."

"And don't they now?" said Alma.

"It is a fashionable crowded place, with its swarms of visitors, its smart parades, and noisy bands, and all that. People are too busy to think about the downs, though, to be sure, they have their large expensive picnics, with all manner of luxuries, and their vans driving to the top, when a horn is blown in half-an-hour's time to collect the visitors. But that is not what I should call enjoyment, or seeing the downs either."

CHAPTER II.

DOWN TO THE GAP.

"A note for Miss Sherbrook," said Mrs. Erle, as she met them one afternoon on their return, and held it out to Alma. "Annette Wray has been here since you went out," said she, turning to her husband," and she wanted to know if our young lady would like to drive with them down to the Gap, as they are going to take a cousin there for the afternoon, making a little picnic of it, in short."

"I wonder how they would go, they have nothing but their pony cart?"

"I daresay they would pack four in that. Well, Alma, what do you say?"

"I forget who Annette Wray is, who invites me to join their party, though I know you told me."

"Her father has the largest farm about here, and she is the eldest daughter; she is a very good girl, and a great favourite of mine."

Alma's look of eagerness seconded her words. "I should indeed like to go very much; I'm so fond of the sea, and I have only seen it yet from a distance; if," she added, doubtfully, "there is no objection."

"Not in the least," said Mrs. Erle, "I only did not know if you would consider them good enough to make companions of."

Alma felt her cheeks burn, but she did not know what to say. Did Mrs. Erle think her so very proud then? Mr. Erle presently said, "Well, I am very fond of Annette Wray, and her father has been a most valuable help to me since first I came. Hadn't you better write and accept it?"

"Thank you, I should like to do so." As Alma left the room to write her answer, she thought, "What two different people they are!"

Tuesday came, and Alma soon found herself seated in the pony cart beside a pleasant sensible-looking young woman. Annette Wray was several years older than herself, hardly so well educated, but so unpretending and simple, and so entirely without any effort to be above her natural position in society, that every one liked and respected her. She began at once, in a friendly way, "I hope you will excuse me, Miss Sherbrook, for not having called to ask you, but I have been more than usually

busy, as my mother has not been well, so everything depends upon me ; but Mr. Erle said before you came, that he thought you were fond of the sea, and would like going down to it some day, so I thought I might ask you when we were taking our cousin."

"Thank you. I am sure it was very kind of you, and I do like going very much. I have never had much enjoyment of the sea, for I have only seen it from a town."

"That is not like where we are going now ; it's just sea and green, and one or two cottages, and nothing else."

"That must be nice ; do you often go there ?"

"Not often, for I am generally too busy to spare a day for it. You see a farm furnishes a great deal to do, and to see to."

"What ! do you look after the dairy, or the poultry ?"

"Both ; and a great deal besides ; and when my brothers are at home, there is all the more to do, for we have four big boys and two little ones."

"And how many sisters to look after them ?"

"Oh ! it mostly falls on me," said Annette, laughing ; "for Lydia is only just come home,—and there are two tiny girls in addition."

"What a nice pony! do you often drive him far?"

"I usually drive my mother into the town for shopping about once a week."

"Miss Sherbrook!" broke in a high clear voice behind her; "You're just come from school, aren't you?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"Mr. Erle told us so; and so am I. I wonder if you were as glad as I was to leave it?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Alma, looking amused. "But why were you so glad to leave it?"

"Oh! I was never so delighted as when Father came to take me home. To have done with lessons, grammar and history, and poetry, which I would never learn; and not to see a French governess at every corner, but, instead, to roam about and have as much fun as I liked—oh! it was delightful. But you don't mean to say you were sorry. Didn't you hate the regular lessons?"

"No, not at all," said Alma, laughing, "and I was very sorry to leave off being taught some of the things in which I was very much interested."

"You are not like me then. But I'm sure you must find it terrible dull living with two old people, now don't you? Mr. Erle is all very well, for he

does joke sometimes, but to see Mrs. Erle sitting opposite you all day long, looking at you over her spectacles in this way," and she threw up her head and poked out her chin, "and taking you all in, Miss Sherbrook!"

"Now, Lydia," said her sister, reprovingly, "do stop talking; you know, as well as I do, you are very fond of Mrs. Erle. The only excuse for her, Miss Sherbrook, is, that she is quite wild at having just come home."

"Quite wild! not a bit; its only what I mean always to be, when good Mrs. Erle is not in sight;" and she made the same face again.

Alma laughed in spite of herself.

"There, now," said Lydia, "I'm so glad I've made you laugh; I've been trying to see your face in church, Miss Sherbrook, but though I have peeped a great many times, I have never managed to catch your eye; yet I can see now you are fond of mischief."

"Come, Lydia," said the cousin, who now spoke for the first time, "do leave off your nonsense, and let us look about and see how pretty it all is; I don't think I ever saw anything like it before."

So Alma thought too, as they turned into a lane where rich overhanging woods climbed up and down the high banks, that shut it in on both sides,

while a little water course was heard plashing among the rank weeds at the bottom of the deep valley they had just entered. The road wound in and out amongst the downs, past many a smooth, shining slope, over whose grassy sides sunlight and shadow flitted by turns, with little farmsteads asleep in the hollows that sheltered them from the keen east winds.

"I can see you care for the country," said Annette, "but I suppose you have never lived in it before."

"No, never; but I have often wished for it."

"Some people think our little village very dull and sleepy. You must find the Vicarage very quiet after being used to many companions. But then, Mr. Erle is so delightful in himself, I think it must be so nice to live with them."

Alma did not respond at once, she only said rather doubtfully, "you see I haven't had much time to make acquaintance."

"No, I suppose not. Mr. Erle is so cultivated and so fond of his books, I often wonder how it is we have so learned a gentleman here: he must be very much at a loss for company I often think, for there's not another such gentleman for miles round. He is so nice to Father too (though of course Father

does not think about books), and he has done such a deal of good in the parish."

"Has he?" said Alma, rousing up, "I should like to hear about that."

"But that's just what I can't tell you," said Annette, "at least, not *how* he has done it all. But the people are much better behaved altogether than they used to be when first he came to Ivyton. Do you know, they would actually go and write silly and bad things inside the church porch, which was all whitewashed, so that everybody saw them as they went into church. It was quite a disgrace."

"Did Mr. Erle get them to leave off doing that? how could he?"

"He went first and had all the whitewash and plaster picked off, and had it fresh done over on a Saturday night; but as they came again and adorned it in the week, he went to work afresh, and asked some of the big lads whom he suspected of the worst mischief, to come and help him, saying he was sure they would like to see how neat and nice the porch looked, and would help him to keep it in order like sensible grown-up men."

"And how did they take it?"

"Oh! some of them laughed, and some said 'Oy!' but they didn't meddle with it again. The people he finds it most difficult to deal with

are the 'foresters,' as they used to be called; people who move from place to place, and who live a great deal by poaching. They are in one parish one week, and then off to another, and nobody knows where to find them."

"How ever do they live then? But, oh! what a pretty village, and what a fine, old church tower, close by the large pond."

"We will get out here, and leave the pony cart at this little inn, and walk the rest. Come, girls, bring out the basket with you. I am afraid you will be disappointed, Miss Sherbrook, in your first view of the sea."

They passed through a farmyard gate, and then walking along on the smooth, fresh turf, with the downs on either side sloping down towards the shore, and ending in a dip down to the beach, right before them rose the sea.

It was a fresh, gusty day; the full tide was flowing in fast, and as the waves hurried on eagerly towards the land, the wind drove the salt spray and sand in their faces. A small low house, with its red-tiled roof, and its sides painted black, told of a coastguard station, from which a swarm of children trooped out, with a few barking dogs. An old sailor was walking up and down by the flagstaff, carrying a large telescope under his arm,

which might rest idly at present, for not a ship was to be seen. But far out at sea it was all white snowy drifts, in heaving, changing, restless motion.

Alma watched in silence, to take it all in; the long powerful waves curling over with a thundering roar, and sweeping up the shingle with a deafening, shattering rush, making them fly before its advancing foam reached them.

"It makes me think of Robinson Crusoe's island," said Alma, turning to her companion, "it's so wild, and large, and desolate."

Annette smiled as if she understood the remark, and presently added, "It reminds me of Hans Andersen's story of the 'Sand Dunes,' and I find myself fancying the hut where Jorgen was brought up on the sea shore."

"Oh! what was that? I don't know it, and I do so like Andersen's stories."

"I think I mustn't spoil it by telling it to you, if you don't know it. Besides it is a very sad story, and I might simply tell that part, and just miss the point if I put it into my own words. But it has a meaning for all that."

"What kind of meaning?"

Annette sat silent for a moment, and then answered gravely, "I can hardly explain it; but I think Andersen must have written it when some

great sorrow or trial had shaken him sorely, and that he wished to impress on his own mind, and on those of others, that the very idea of a life of inexplicable suffering and calamity, makes us feel more keenly the truth of belief in another life:— that *this* cannot be all, with a Being of eternal love and goodness.”

Alma listened in silence, while Annette continued, “ Perhaps I think this all the more, from remembering the first time I ever read the story. Mr. Erle came in just as I was reading the end of it to mother, and told me to go on. It was just after one of my uncles had been lost at sea— mother’s favourite brother—and she had been talking of it. I don’t remember so much what Mr. Erle said, for I was quite a child ; I know I didn’t wonder at poor mother’s crying, but I believe I looked with astonishment to see the tears in our parson’s eyes. And then he put his hand on my head, and smoothed my hair very kindly, and hoped I should grow up a good girl ; and I never forgot that time, nor mother either.”

“ He is very kind,” said Alma.

“ Oh, yes ; so kind and thoughtful for everybody. I am sure I owe all the best teaching I have had to him ; he lent me so many of his books, and told me what to read. Have you read with him at all ? ”

"No, I didn't know if he would like it," answered Alma, doubtfully.

"But I feel sure he would like you to ask him; for he said, before you came, he hoped you would take an interest in study of some kind. Oh, Lydia!" she called out suddenly, "do be careful, and not get so near those large waves, they might sweep you off your feet in a moment. I believe the tide is not yet at its height. What do you say, Master Castle?" she said, turning to the old coast guardsman, "Can we walk round under the Head to-day?"

"Don't you think of it, miss, by no manner of means; t'aint safe one bit, with them big rollers, and wind blowing in shore. The tide's still a coming up, and afore you could get round you would be drowned sure enough."

"Then I'm afraid we can't see *the Parson's Hole* either?"

"No, miss; it's too far round the next point."

"Oh! what is that?" said Alma. "I should so like to see it."

"It's a cavern that they say was hollowed out by the parson of that village we passed through, and he used to burn a light there; some say it was for a beacon to warn sailors to avoid the rocks, and others would have it that he was in a league with

smugglers, and showed a light to guide them. What do you think, Castle ? ”

“ That be possible, miss ; for parsons in those days would often run up queer colours. Can’t say, no how.”

“ But don’t you think,” said Annette, “ that it is quite possible that smugglers may have used the light as a signal, and then have given the credit of it to the parson.”

“ That’s clever of you, miss ; but I can’t say if ’twas or ’twasn’t so ; ” and old Castle stuck his oilskin hat more resolutely on his head.

“ Is there much smuggling now ? ” asked Alma.

“ Bless you, no ; there’s nothing to do it for now. Some thirty or forty years ago, there was something to be got by it ; and we used to see queer things often. Why, in the town down yonder, when it was a village, we’ve had shots fired round the corners, breaking the panes of glass in the windows, and frightening folks out of their sleep. When I was a big lad, I once saw the coastguard, down at Hastings, tow a smuggler’s boat into a yard, and when they thought they had emptied her, they padlocked the gate and went away. As soon as they were out of the way, up come some friends of the smugglers who had been watching in the crowd, and lifting up some planks that made a false bot-

tom to the boat, didn't they carry off a fine catch of kegs and barrels ! and no one was there to say a word against them."

"That was a cool way, indeed, of cheating the coastguard," said Annette, "and how the smugglers laughed over it, no doubt ! for I suppose they all got off."

"O' course they did, miss, and a rare lot they carried away."

"Was anybody ever saved from a wreck, in that cavern ?" asked Alma.

"No one as ever I heard on, miss ; one high sea, a parcel of Frenchmen got inside there, thinking to be safe, but the waves washed in, and drove 'em up against the roof, and they were all drowned, poor fellows !"

"Oh ! how very sad ; and when they expected they were saved."

"You don't often have wrecks here, Castle," said Annette.

"Why, not so very often, for that matter ; you see the ships keep pretty far from land, for fear of the rocks under the Head."

"Are there so many rocks ?" asked Alma.

"Here and there, little lady. There's one ridge like a shark's mouth ; when once you are in, there's no saying how you can get out."

"Then is passing the Head dangerous?"

"Mighty gusty! mighty gusty! if you come near shore."

"That I can tell," said Annette; "I remember Father took me round under it one day, and, though we had the sail closely reefed, the wind was so gusty that our boatman sat with the sheet in his hand, ready to ease it any instant. It made me feel rather timid. It was just like checking a galloping horse, for the boat flew along the sea."

"Had ought to be a good boatman for that, miss. Who was it?"

"Young Jack Standfast, I think."

"Ah! he'd do; but some of them young chaps are terrible careless like; always mind who you go with, Miss Anne."

"I suppose," said Alma, glancing round the horizon, "there are not many ships to be seen near the coast?"

"No; sometimes you'll see one brig, out of a lot of colliers, beating round the Head; no big ships, if they be wise; it's mostly fishing luggers, or a *Chase a Mary* as has got out of her track."

"What is a chaser Mary?"

"A French fishing boat; that's a *Chase a Mary*."

Castle presently broke out hastily, "I say, Miss Annie, is yon one of your lot? 'cause 'taint safe

no hows. Hey ! hey ! yeo hoy ! ” he shouted and beckoned, while Annette rose hastily from her seat, calling in terror, “ Oh, Lydia ! Lydia ! do come back ! ”

Lydia Wray had gone dancing down to the sea with her cousin, and was flitting heedlessly about just on the edge of the waves, now dipping the large bunch of seaweed into the foam, now rushing forward to the breaking billow as if to dare it, and so intent on her amusement, as not to perceive, in the roar and din of the advancing tide, that a steeply shelving bank of shingle hemmed in her retreat. Each time she attempted to ascend it, and to reach the hand her cousin held out to her, the stones slid down under her slippery feet ; she felt the cold foamy water round her ankles, sweeping her off her balance, again she scrambled up the bank, which again gave way, and breathless and panting, she now screamed for assistance.

Annette and Alma had rushed forward to help the rash girl, when old Castle passed them with rapid strides, shouting out, “ you keep back, both on you ! ” and the next instant, lying flat on the edge of the shingle bank, his strong arm had clutched Lydia Wray, and dragged her, dripping and terrified, up the steep ascent. It was with no gentle grasp that he had seized her, and as she

sank down exhausted on the stones, he began in a loud voice, heard above the roar and turmoil, "Mind you never do that again, Miss Lydia! Maybe next time nobody else would be nigh, and if one o' them big rollers had carried you off your feet, no mortal man could save you. D'ye think I could wade into a sea like that after you? Why, if all the men in the station were waiting with the boat, all ready to run her out, you'd be carried out to sea, and all the breath knocked out of you afore we could reach you. 'Taint the first time you've done the like, and p'raps next time it wont be so easy to save you. If I was your father I'd keep you at home till you knew better."

"Well, you needn't be so cross, old Castle," said Lydia, pettishly, "how could I help the shingle giving way?"

"Come, Lydia, he is quite right, and you know it. You have frightened us all terribly, and yourself too; I do wish you were not so very heedless. Do get up and thank Master Castle for saving you, which indeed I do."

"All right, Miss Anne," said the old sailor; "but, come now, miss, you mind next time what your captain says; and don't lay there like a piece of wet seaweed, or, for all it's salt water, you may catch a chill. You take her to the house, Miss

Anne, and Mrs. Davies will make you a fire, and dry her clothes a bit."

Lydia at length was persuaded to get up, and dragged along rather sullenly to the little black house.

Such a crowd of little children came streaming out from two or three open doors, as Mrs. Davies, the wife of the head boatman, came out to meet them. She was a pale-faced nervous-looking woman, and it was said her husband was rather a harsh man. But she pitied "the young lady for her misfortunes," and begged them all to come in to the small red fire that glowed in the corner of a tiny room. A misty scud of rain was beginning to drift over the sea; Annette Wray saw it would soon be too wet for their picnic on the beach, and proposed that they should have some tea, if Mrs. Davies could provide it. "Oh, yes; and it might save the young lady from cold; and would she change her clothes? I could find her some." The offer was at once accepted, and Lydia Wray, in a little square room, nearly filled up by a large bed, was soon arrayed in the best clothes of the head boatman's wife. She very soon recovered her spirits enough to laugh at her strange costume; for she was tall, and Mrs. Davies was short; but that did not matter, it was all the better fun.

"What a quaint, pretty little room!" said Alma, "just like a ship's cabin, I suppose."

Everything seemed fitted into its place, as if prepared for a gale; and everything had that look of perfect neatness and handiness, that ship-shape look, that sailors alone can produce from the most ordinary materials. The bits of spar, the pink and white shells on the mantle-piece, the shining oilskin hats, the telescope, sabres and pistols, a medal or two,—a few tiny pictures,—all gave to the little room that air of comfort and good taste, that form so great a charm in a sailor's home. Looking through the small thick panes in the window, there were seen paths made of shell rubbish, bordered by white flints,—while a few wall-flowers and pinks shivered half torn from their places by the sea blast.

The whistling wind beat the ropes of the flag-staff against the mast, so that you almost had the feeling of being out at sea. "It's all so new to me," remarked Alma, "I do like seeing it so much."

Mrs. Davies had been arranging the table with her best tea things, and a little girl of eight years old was neatly helping her mother. Other children were peeping in at the door, to see the strangers. "Those are not all of them your children, Mrs. Davies," said Annette Wray.

"Oh, thank goodness! no, miss; four is quite enough to look after, and as many as we've room for."

"Is this the eldest?"

"No, miss; the eldest goes to school, for he's a big boy. But Teddy here is so weakly, he's quite a baby, though he's nigh upon four years old, and there's a baby of eighteen months."

"How many children are there in the station besides?"

"Oh! one on 'ems got four, and the other six,—about twenty in all, miss; you wouldn't think there were so many here, but they are packed pretty close."

"What a nice noise and confusion they must make all together," said Lydia, "do let us have some fun!"

"Oh dear! miss," said Mrs. Davies, "my husband wouldn't like that at all; the head boatman has to keep things quiet and in order, so please, Miss Lydia, don't make them too wild."

This was a necessary precaution, for as Mrs. Davies had long since found out, the children were always naughty for two days after Miss Lydia had taught them some fresh mischief.

"Do come and sit down, and pour out the tea for us, Mrs. Davies," said Annette, "I don't sup-

pose you often have a quiet hour with all you have to do."

"We have visitors sometimes, Miss Annette, it's a little company, for 'tis very lonesome here when winter comes on. You've not been for a long time."

"No, but I shall hope to come oftener now; for this young lady is new to the place, and she may like me to bring her here again."

Alma's sparkling eyes showed her pleasure.

"Are the children healthy here?" she asked.
"That little boy looks very pale."

"They are all very well in general, miss; but he's that weakly I can't let him go along with the rest. In summer and good weather it's nice for them to be out all day; but we're often obliged to keep them in a deal, for it's very bleak down here, and when the wind's off shore, you're a'most afraid of their being blown into the sea. We're not so bad off as they are on the top, when the fogs and snow are on it."

"Are they very bad?"

"Oh dear me, miss! when everything is wrapped up in white, you don't hardly dare to let a child outside the door, for fear they should lose themselves, and wander down the cliff. I could never bear to live there, I should be so frightened."

The little room was packed very close, as the girls and children sat at tea with Mrs. Davies. There was a merry chatter for a long time, as the bread and butter and biscuits disappeared, to which Mrs. Davies had added a few shrimps and some bacon."

Little Teddy Davies meanwhile had begun to make friends with Alma, peeping round her chair and smiling at her. He was a sweet, engaging looking child, with his curly flaxen hair and blue eyes. "He doesn't often take to strangers, miss; he's quite Mother's boy, is Teddy.' The little fellow had climbed on Alma's knee, and there he sat quietly till Lydia Wray began to frighten him by a succession of ugly faces; which at length so disturbed him, that he slid down, and crept to his mother's side with a thumb in his mouth.

The rain would not clear, but Annette Wray was anxious to be gone in good time, though the others would fain have lingered; but when she persisted that she could not leave her mother to do all the work alone, Lydia was at length induced to change her dress, and to leave off teasing the children.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Davies," said Annette, "when next I come, I will bring some of father's apples for the children; I'm sure they must like an apple pudding sometimes; don't you, Teddy?"

As they turned their backs on the sea, a faint silvery gleam came over the white foamy element, and Alma lingered a moment to watch it, before the quiet little spot was left behind. Perhaps, the next time she saw it, she would understand the story of the Sand Dunes.

Such a pleasant day it had been, she told Annette; and everything was so new and curious to her, she had been very much interested. "Thank you so very much for taking me; I have liked so much the sight of the sea. I hope your sister won't get cold now."

Annette smiled and nodded, looking as she drove away as if it had been a pleasure to her also, which she would like to repeat.

CHAPTER III.

DIFFICULTIES.

LITTLE difficulties began before long to grow up between Mrs. Erle and Alma. The good lady was very particular in her ideas about young people.

“ My dear, I think it would be very improving to you to practice a little music regularly,” she said one morning, “ besides I should like the piano to be made use of.”

“ Thank you,” said Alma rather coldly, “ but I don’t play much.”

“ All the more reason then for your employing part of the day in practising.”

“ But I don’t care for it.”

“ You said you liked music, I thought.”

Alma felt quite vexed, but she only said, “ I meant I liked singing, but I know so very little music, and I’ve hardly any books.”

“ Oh, I can supply you with those,” said Mrs.

Erle cheerfully, "for I have a number you can look through at any time."

Alma inwardly groaned at the pile of worn old-fashioned music books pressed upon her, and began to turn over their pages with a very bad grace. Admirable pieces of music by first-rate composers they mostly were; but the crabbed-looking masses of notes, some very black, some very pale, conveyed very little to her mind. Her tastes did not lead her in that direction, and she had always felt far too much time had been devoted to her learning to play indifferently well at school. "I wanted so much to read this morning," she thought, "and now I am set down like a child to the piano."

At length turning upon a very easy air of Mozart's, she managed to stumble through it a few times; Mrs. Erle making little fidgetty noises of disapprobation at each mistake, until she was called away to attend to a message. Alma hastily escaped to her own room, but the morning was wasted; she felt too much vexed to read, and she spent the time walking up and down, trying to regain her composure.

And yet she knew it had all been well meant, and she was not in the right.

At the early dinner Mrs. Erle told her husband that Alma had been trying the piano, and she

hoped they should now have the pleasure of sometimes hearing music in the evening.

"Indeed ! that will be very nice," said Mr. Erle.

Alma looked piteous, though she said nothing.

"And I should like to arrange, my dear, that you should try and make the school children sing a little better ; I am sure Annette will be glad to give it up, for she has so much to do. And you said you were fond of singing, you know."

"But I don't know how to teach."

"There's nothing like trying to make you know how," said Mr. Erle kindly.

"But wouldn't her sister Lydia like to do it ? She can sing nicely."

"Lydia ! not she." and Mrs. Erle laughed derisively, adding rather sharply, "I never heard of Lydia doing anything that was any good to a single human being. I never saw such an idle young person in all my life, and, though she can be very amusing, I hope, Alma, you won't make a friend of *her*."

"There's not much of Annette about Lydia certainly ; there you may be sure of a great deal, Alma, that is good and sterling," said Mr. Erle.

"Besides," broke in his wife, recurring to the subject, "it is quite right that the young lady from the Vicarage should see after the singing in church,

and so I should like you to do it. Friday is the day for practising."

So Alma was obliged to swallow down any further objections, especially when Mr. Erle said, in a very kind tone, "You see, my dear, we want your help, and shall value it."

Her first experience was not very successful, though Annette Wray gave her all possible help in the arrangement and leading of the children, and remained with her till they had gone through the Morning Hymn. Alma felt rather timid when she was left alone. The man at the barrel organ began again to play, and the children, staring at their new teacher, began to sing "My soul, praise the Lord."

They had rough, harsh voices, and shouted in their Sussex dialect into her ears. "Can't you sing more gently?" she said at the end of the verse, "you make too much noise; try again." The next verse was sung lower, several voices had dropped out; and towards the end of the psalm she saw, to her dismay, that two of the young Bateses were lolling against the desk, and enjoying some nuts they were cracking. She appealed to the man at the organ, "What can I do with them?"

"Put 'em out o' church, miss; they be bad boys," and he proceeded to carry out his threat.

The psalms then continued in a very flat nasal key, and all her efforts to make them pitch their voices higher seemed utterly hopeless.

After several weeks Mrs. Erle remarked one Sunday, "Well, Alma, you have succeeded at last in making the children sing better; I hope you are satisfied."

"No, indeed, I am not," said Alma shortly, "and I should like to give up teaching them."

"But why?" said Mrs. Erle, opening her eyes in astonishment.

"I can't think of anything but the children's mistakes, I don't think of singing a hymn, I feel so vexed with the tiresome little things, and it does me no good going to church."

"My dear?" said Mrs. Erle in a shocked tone.

Alma continued vehemently, "And I don't feel it right,—I keep singing over solemn words, and I don't think about them one bit, only about the children and the discord they make. I really must give it up."

"Gently, Alma," said Mr. Erle, "I should like, as you have undertaken it, that you should keep it on a few weeks longer. By that time—"

"But I never did wish to undertake it, said she, half crying, "it was put upon me."

"Because we wished it," said he kindly, "and

because we felt sure you would be ready to help us. It is trying to the patience I know, but, perhaps, after a little time, you may succeed better, and then it will not dwell on your mind so much."

"Alma really is very provoking," said Mrs. Erle a few days later, "I have left off saying much about her practising, because I thought she did not like it, and I asked her to teach the children singing because I thought it might interest her,—and see how she takes it. She is a strange girl."

"And yet she has a good many thoughts in that little head of hers," said her husband.

"Has she?" then shaking her head, she added, "but it will never do, my dear."

"What will never do?"

"Why, our having her to live with us. She will never take to it. I said so from the first."

"But, Letty, I should say that depends upon ourselves just as much as upon Alma, perhaps more so. At all events, I feel as if everything depended on my own acts, because I first pressed the arrangement. She came to us as a homeless girl, and it is for us to make her feel she is at home."

"Well, I am sure it's not my fault if she doesn't feel it so. Then she has so many fancies; this is all a whim about the children, and it's not being right."

“ I think not, Letty; I think she is quite sincere, but she is very inexperienced. It requires a little time for a young maid to understand when the actual routine work must begin, and when good feeling and impulse alone will not bring about any result. Alma is very impulsive, and if too much checked, young people may be easily discouraged. Ah! my dear wife, remember how many mistakes we made, how many failures we had when first we came to this parish. How your own favourite servant ran away, and married a ‘forester,’—how we met with so much opposition, and how disheartened we were! And we had each other to bear the burthen together, or how could we have got through it all?”

“ Ah! my dear, kind husband, how indeed could I have got through it all without you!”

“ Alma has nobody,” he continued, “and we must take, as much as possible, the place of parents to her; the child must be helped as best we can. Besides, Letty, how could I, with any pretence of preaching that Gospel which is the blessed possession of us all, leave the fatherless orphan with only passing kindness, so near akin to neglect? Now is the time to practice what we preach, and you must help me.”

“ You always are so kind to young ones,” she

said, looking at him fondly, but half relenting. Yet when he had left her, she thought, "A man doesn't know all the difficulties, and the feeling yourself not the only one in the house!"

Still there were better thoughts come into her mind; she would never willingly oppose her husband's wishes, and when next she knelt at her prayers, it was with a petition that if the orphan girl did remain at Ivyton, she might be wise and kind with her, and be able even to bestow more love on her than she felt she could at present. Whether she could ever succeed, who can tell?

Anyhow, she tried to smooth over some of Alma's difficulties about the singing, by suggesting that she should have some of the elder girls to try their voices and improve them by the piano; and although the suggestion was not very eagerly received, the benefit was very soon felt.

In the course of a long walk, Mr. Erle took an opportunity of drawing out more fully Alma's objections to teaching the children. She had always desired to give her whole heart to the singing in church, to feel it was really, "My soul praise the Lord!" and now it was only a lesson that made her feel quite put out with the children, and entirely took up her attention from anything else.

“I hope you may find you get over this in time, my dear,” he said in an encouraging tone, “but it is a difficulty I can quite well recognize, for I remember feeling the same when I was young. You see, Alma, very young and inexperienced people can hardly know how much actual routine work is required in a parish; they believe it is needed in a town, and perhaps not in the country. You have probably little idea yet of the amount of routine and regularity necessary to keep up even such a thing as a clothing club or coal club for instance; especially among a very ignorant set of people. But such things do not come of themselves; and if our children are to be taught to sing, somebody must teach them: and impulse and feeling alone will not carry us over these difficulties. There was a person of whom I often think with regard to you, Alma; she was very hopeful and gentle, and her sweetness gave her a power of overcoming almost insuperable difficulties; there was nothing she touched but you could see the trace of a soothing hand; no irritation, no sore feeling was left, it was all ‘peace, perfect peace,’ in anything she took up; influencing all around her for their good, both those who were much older, as well as younger ones. It is well to think of such an one.”

“Oh! how I should like to know her,” cried Alma.

He shook his head, "She died very early; but when I meet with any one young and bright, I still think of her as an example to others,—it is invaluable in youth to have had such a sister,—and, perhaps, still more so for us old ones to have such a blessed remembrance."

Alma did not break the pause which followed, and when Mr. Erle spoke again, he resumed, "But I do fully appreciate what you say, and also the wearisome effect of routine, and the narrowing tone it produces; I have often felt, in coming to the end of a week, like a mere machine, and as if there was nothing of life left in me. And then when one begins to preach, and feels falling into only saying common-place phrases, and oft repeated truisms, to these simple people, it is still worse; and seems to be like setting up dry bones with no life in them. But something can be done."

"But what?" said Alma,

"In the first place, to remember the means is not the end. One may often ask in despair, 'Can these bones live?' And then comes the same answer, and is not the same Spirit of the Lord that brought them together bone to bone, and clothed them with flesh and sinews, able to breathe also into our feeble work the breath of life, and make it full of power and vigour, till as the dried-

up bones arose and became again living men,—so will that might of the Lord, in spite of human weakness, shew its power even in out-of-the-way valleys and hills, and raise up a people living to God. At least, such is my prayer and hope.”

He had stopped, leaning against a gate, and Alma, sitting on the stile, was thinking over his last words, with the tones of his voice still sounding in her ears. “What a beautiful field of wheat we are looking into!” he remarked. “But what an amount of careful tillage, of weeding out thistles, wire grass, poppies, and other plants, before it comes to this perfection!” In a low tone he murmured, “‘I planted, Apollos watered, but God giveth the increase.’ But, my dear girl, try to sow in hope, and the harvest will come in time.”

The sun was getting low, with clouds of golden beauty; the waving wheat, stirred by the evening breeze, seemed to repeat, “the harvest will come in time!” the birds skimming and flitting here and there, the insects dancing in the sunshine seemed to repeat, “the harvest will come in time! work, work in hope, while it is still to-day.”

Mr. Erle did not limit himself simply to giving advice. The next time that Alma went to practice

with the children, while waiting for the heavy-footed tribe to come tramping up the pathway, she heard a pleasant, cheery voice, "Come, children! we are all going to do our best, Miss Sherbrook is going to teach us all how to sing, and I am going to learn, and shall be her biggest scholar." And, standing in front of the children, he led with his voice and kind eyes, giving Alma many useful hints as they went on, till the whole lesson took a different tone under his guidance.

"And how kindly he does it all!" thought Alma.

Six months had passed away, and the early autumn was come. Mr. Erle had grown very fond of his adopted niece; he took her out for long walks, he drew her into conversations on interesting topics, he would often spend half-an-hour in helping her in a subject she was studying, he tried to make her feel as one of the family. Even Mrs. Erle was getting rather more used to Alma, and so liked her a little better; but she was a strangely shy woman, who took a long time to form any real kind of intimacy. She had never originally wished to have Alma, she felt as if she never should do so; they did not suit each other, and this led to a good many little jars between them.

Still Mrs. Erle was obliged to allow that it was pleasant when her husband read aloud to them in the evenings, to hear intelligent remarks and questions which led to more conversation than she was equal to herself; it was good for her husband she said, and sometimes even she felt a fresh interest in the well-known play of Shakespear, or in other poets, from the eagerness with which the girl of seventeen heard them for the first time.

Sometimes Mr. Erle would make Alma divide the parts with him, which was a great pleasure to her; she had a sweet voice, and read with feeling.

"You make a very nice little Viola, my dear," he said one evening, laughing, "are you and Sebastian often mistaken for each other?"

"Oh no! my Sebastian isn't at all like me."

"What is he like, my dear?" said Mrs. Erle.

"Oh, he's tall and strong, and very handsome,—and you see I am little; and he has curly hair and laughing eyes, and is full of fun."

And then Alma looked rather sad, as the question passed through her mind, when she should see her brother again.

"Suppose we were to ask this brother of hers to come here for his next holidays?" said Mr. Erle one day to his wife, suggesting the idea for the first time.

“ My dear Matthew ! what can you mean ? ”

“ I mean what I say, Letty. You know Lady Anstey has asked my opinion about the boy's having the slightest chance of ever passing for the army, as he has set his heart upon it ; and there is no more simple way of settling that question than by getting him here for a few days.”

Mrs. Erle was taken by surprise. “ Really, Matthew, I think you are a little inconsiderate ; wherever should we put him ; we have little room enough, and what could we do with him ? Alma is quite anxiety enough, for you or me either, and whatever could we do with a young man of eighteen ? ”

“ Somehow I must find out if he is fit or presentable for an examination, and it is easier for me to do that by his coming here, than by my going on a long journey to see him at Dr. Berry's, and judging from his report only. Besides, as Berry has always said he was an idle fellow——”

“ Therefore all the more reason for your taking an idle good-for-nothing lad into your family !! Oh, my dear husband, how you do lade yourself with burthens more than you need. It is no fault of yours if he does not pass.”

“ I feel bound to help him to a chance, Letty, and if he fails, Lady Anstey wants me to suggest

some other employment ; and for that I must see what he is fit for, so the easiest plan is to do as I say."

"You always try and make out that any fresh piece of work is the easiest thing in the world," said she, half relenting, "but it does not always prove so."

"I hope it may turn out to be so," he said, with a smile ; besides, our little Alma looks to me rather drooping just now, and surely she must want to see her brother sometimes. She has really no nice companion but Annette Wray."

"She will not get much good from her brother's companionship, if he is such as you say."

"But you must remember, after all, he is her brother, and we must try and make the best of him."

After some more discussion, Mr. Erle carried his point so far that she agreed he should write to make enquiries, but she added, "Well, you must let me know, if he comes, many days beforehand ; you see boys cause a great deal of trouble, and I must provide so much more food, which all costs us more money !"

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE DOWNS IN OCTOBER.

Mrs. ERLE was not far wrong when she said Alma was given to fancies—at least if that meant given to dreaming. Perhaps it was not strange under the circumstances, when she had little interchange of thought with those of her own age, and though possessed of a mind that was searching in all directions, yet had not acquired any great steadiness of purpose. Rambling thoughts would pass through her brain, building for themselves castles in the air, that were very delightful and absorbing for the time. They would carry her away to other places, and surround her with different materials out of which to form her own ideal of happiness. But in all circumstances she was to be good and great, showing herself capable of noble exertion and of striking sacrifices. Sometimes it would be a life spent entirely alone, sometimes surrounded

by those who loved her tenderly, or perhaps with one who was the sole object of her devoted affections. Young people are very apt to fall into this kind of castle building, and it is both natural and right to form a high standard for the ideal of life and happiness. But if Alma had watched her own mind, she would have found that she herself was the central point of everything; that her eyes were not open to the good qualities of those around her, but that keenly alive to their defects, she had little or no idea of their merits or actions except with reference to herself; and she certainly had no conception of the interest or affection that was already bestowed upon her at Ivyton Vicarage. There was a certain amount of selfishness in all this, though it did not appear to Alma in that form.

It was in one of these moods that she went out for a solitary walk on an Autumn afternoon in October. Uncle Matthew was called away on business at the nearest town, and Aunt Letty was sitting at home, afraid of the damp. There had been various little annoyances in the course of the morning, and Alma had gone out, as she said, "to set herself straight."

As she came out into the pretty little rambling village, with its old church overlooking the nearer

cottages from a little eminence, the sloping down rising above, and the red and golden trees retreating down the hill, she stood still to look at the well-known objects around her. She had thought it all so pretty at first, now the feeling was, "shall I have to live here always? I do not think I should like it, and yet I do not know what to do. They said to me in a year I could think about it, but it is as well to do it beforehand. To be sure Uncle Matthew is so kind, so kind; but I shall never be what I want, never be free to carry out my own wishes. And poor Johnny too!"

She turned her steps towards the down, climbing up the grassy slope, and stopped now and then to drink in the light pure air which gently stirred the longest blades of grass, and passed like a breath from a purer region than in the plain below.

Oh! the beauty of those downs; their gracefully rounded forms curving one upon another, lying open and bare in the silence of the heavens, motionless in the storm, smiling in the sunshine, peacefully soft in the gray twilight, and asleep underneath the stars. The wearied soul carried up there out of the turmoil and care of the world, and in the silence and quiet, feeling its own smallness,—

“ And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar stairs,
That slope through darkness up to God,”

must surely leave some of its earthly burden behind, and be raised by the grandeur and beauty around. Oh ! for the refreshment and the peace of their pure stillness and solitude !

Alma would sit for hours, sometimes with a book, sometimes with a pencil, on the edge of the down, overlooking the level country ; “ it's a sea of hills above,” she thought, and she liked to imagine it a sea below, where all that level would lie as a sheet of silvery, shining water, a still lake, with wild birds and gigantic reeds around its fairy shores, and only the roughest kind of fisher bark sometimes to be seen. Or she would fill all the region with an impenetrable forest, where human foot rarely trod, and which the imagination peopled with evil spirits, until some devoted and holy man (from a distant country), carrying the banner of the Cross, at the risk of his life would struggle through the wilds to make known the name of his Lord ; only to end in a torturing martyrdom at the court of some wild, fierce prince, or savage tribe.

“ And yet they did it, they did it somehow,” she exclaimed aloud, as she looked on the rich scene spread out at her feet, where fresh pastures,

and waving corn fields, and homestead farms, were dotted about, and the little old-fashioned stone country church spoke of a Christian faith.

And yet, Alma, is there not still much to do in this out of the way country among the downs? Are our people yet too far advanced beyond what they were in those heathen times? Are their thoughts and doings so far beyond the beasts for which they care? Do they often rise beyond their present bodily needs?

Alma was so deep in these thoughts that a step had approached her unperceived, and she started as Annette Wray addressed her.

"Are you sitting here all alone, Miss Alma? I suppose you like to come up on the downs for a rest, as I do. It's so quiet and still here."

"Yes, I do. But what's the matter, Annette? You don't look well, and you are not usually out at this time?"

"Oh, it's only a bad headache. Mother would have me go out, as she said I'd been sitting too close finishing up the boys' things, to send off to school. It will soon be better in this fine air."

"Doesn't Lydia help you with them all?"

Annette shook her head rather sadly as she said, "Not much. She says she has so many other things to do."

“ But what does she really do ? ”

“ I am afraid her great work is only trimming and retrimming her hats, which she does very much too often.”

“ But doesn't she ever look after the little ones ? ”

“ Mother tries to get her to do it ; but she is so giddy she leads them into all manner of mischief. We've been talking to Lydia now for a long time, till I'm quite ——”

“ Quite tired out ? ”

“ Well, yes, or out of heart. So I was going to refresh myself for a few minutes here, and then to go and see old Molly Jackson. Have you seen Molly lately, Miss Alma ? ”

“ No,” said Alma, rather doubtfully, and blushing a little, “ not for a long time.”

“ I am sorry for that ; she likes so much seeing you, and she is often very lonely, poor old Molly. And did you know those little Bateses have never been at school for a long time ? ”

“ I forgot that,” said Alma, a little ashamed at feeling how she had neglected her small duties ; “ but if you are going to see Molly I'll walk along with you, and I can tell Mrs. Bates while you are with Molly.”

“ Do come in and see the old woman too, won't you ? ”

Alma hesitated ; " I never feel as if I was doing any good. I can't talk to them nicely, as you do."

" I don't understand ; I don't set to and talk to them, I just do as it comes."

" Yes, but Annette, I can't say things that are right and good, and—religious—I suppose, and so I don't feel as if I did them any good."

Annette looked puzzled, but after a pause she said, " Nobody expects you. Just be your own self, Miss Alma dear, and let them see you take an interest in their ways and doings. They like that, and they think a great deal of a lady going among them. But for myself," said Annette, modestly, " I often feel I learn a great deal from those below me. To be sure, I sometimes have to find a great deal of fault, and sometimes when things have gone wrong with Father and the men, I have to set it straight with the wives, and that's rather a hard matter."

" But how can you learn anything ?"

" Perhaps if you come in and see old Molly, you may know something of what I mean."

Alma proceeded to the neat cottage, where Mrs. Bates was rather surly; she had never got over her boys being put out from the practising, and pretended she thought they were not to attend

school—she would see about it;—well, they might go as Miss Alma wished it so much.

It was pleasanter turning into old Molly Jackson's room. There the old woman sat, and though drawn together with rheumatism, she looked pleasantly, yet eagerly, towards Annette, and as Alma entered she heard, "Please read it, my dear, for it's small print, my eyes are tired, but I like that piece."

Through the long night watches, in the freezing cold,
Wearied out and helpless, waiting for the morn—
In the trench the soldier stands, firm his post to hold
Till the bugle sounds recall to comrades weak and worn.

And in life's long battle, many an aged one,
Powerless, sightless, silent, worn out with the strife,
Patient rests on guard, until he sees the sun
Gleam across the distant hills that close the Gates of Life.

Then the deep, dark River, with its icy wave,
Soon into a silver Living stream has grown,
And the seed in weakness sown within the grave,
Rests in hope to hear the call to those whom Christ will own.

"Ah! that reminds me of my soldier son, poor fellow. And when I lie down at night, all aches and shivers, I remember how my poor boy's bed was colder than mine, for he lay down in the snow before Sebastopol, in the cold trenches, and I've got a roof to cover me, and firing and food.

And then I try to pray that I may be thankful for my comforts, and not grumble, and ask God's mercy on all poor things who are suffering in the cold, all soldiers and sailors too, and ever so many poor people."

"Did your son lose his life at Sebastopol," asked Alma.

"N—no, miss. But he was never fit for anything after. He was forty years old when he died, though I call him a boy still, for he was my youngest."

"Did you ever hear a poem about a soldier falling down in the snow at Sebastopol, and asking his officer to leave him as the men were wanted, and how they found him covered with the snow, and quite dead when they came back?"

"No, miss. Can you say it me?"

Alma began, after a pause, "The soldier speaks first."

THE ROAD TO THE TRENCHES.*

"Leave me comrades—here I drop.
No, Sir, take them on,
All are wanted, none should stop,
Duty must be done.
Those whose guard you take will find me
As they pass below."

* *La Nation Bontiquière* and other Poems, chiefly Political, by Henry Lushington.—Macmillan & Co., 1855.

So the soldier spoke, and staggering
Fell amidst the snow.
And ever on the dreary heights
Down came the snow.

“Men, it must be as he asks;
Duty must be done.
Far too few for half our tasks
We can spare not one.
Wrap him in this—I need it less;
Fear not—they shall know.
Mark the place—yon stunted larch,
Forward!” on they go,
And silent on their silent march
Down sank the snow.

On his features, as he lies,
Calms the wretch of pain;
Close, faint eyes; pass, cruel skies,
Freezing mountain plain.
With far soft sounds the stillness teems;
Church bells,—voices low,
Passing into English dreams,
There amid the snow.
And darkening, thickening o’er the heights
Down fell the snow.

Looking, looking for the mark,
Down the others came,
Struggling through the snow-rifts stark,
Calling out his name.
“Here, or there? the drifts are deep:
Have we passed him? No—
Look a little growing heap,
Snow above the snow,
Where heavy on his heavy sleep
Down fell the snow.

Strong hands raised him, voices strong
Spoke within his ears;
Ah! his dreams had softer tongue,
Neither now he hears.
One more gone for England's sake
Where so many go.
Lying down, without complaint,
Dying in the snow;
Starving, striving for her sake,
Dying in the snow.

Simply done his soldier's part
Through long months of woe,
All endured with soldier heart,
Battle, famine, snow;
Noble, nameless, English heart,
Snow-cold, in snow.

Old Molly wiped her eyes. "Ah! there was a many went that way. What is it? Lying down—"

"Lying down without complaint
Dying in the snow."

"What beautiful lines; I never heard that before," said Annette.

"Uncle read it me one day, and I learnt it by heart," said Alma. "He told me he believed he had known the gentleman by sight who wrote those lines; for he used to ride about on these very downs with his friends and his sisters. The old sailor folks in the village down just by the sea, used to know him well, and were very fond of him."

"I daresay, miss; he must have had many a

thought for the poor soldiers. Your papa, miss, was a soldier I've heard."

"Yes, indeed," said Alma, as if she was proud of it; "and they gave me my name from the river at which he was killed."

"Ah!" said the old woman, with a long sigh; "then there must have been a many tears put into that name, I don't doubt. But I like to see your face, my dear."

"Tell her why, Molly," said Annette.

"I'm a poor, foolish old woman, and I'm very lonely, miss, but once I had all mine about me—husband and boys, and girls."

"Had you many children?"

"Yes, Miss Alma, seven in all. Some of them left me as little things,—three pretty little lambs I called them, and two boys were lost at sea. Then there was the soldier I told you of, and my youngest girl. It's nigh upon twenty years since she was carried out of my doors, and never in all that time have I seen a young face that 'minded me of hers. Miss Annette's a dear, good young lady, but no—she's not like my Silvey, and Miss Lydia—not a bit. But when you come, my dear, there's a something makes me look at you, and 'minds me of my poor girl tripping in, so light of foot and so piert. So I like to see you, Miss Alma, my dear; you've been long a coming."

"I will try and come oftener, Molly, now I know."

"Ah! do, there's a dear. Days is long, and nights is long. They were a beautiful set of boys and girls as ever you set eyes on. It's more than fifty years since I was married, and they've all left me one by one.

"Yes, I've lost a many, and I'm the last of 'em. Sometimes I sit here alone, I seem to see their faces all before me in a row; and I look at them, and says, 'Yes, my dears, I'm coming to you sometime, if I be good enough, please the Lord.' And then I say a little prayer, and I hear the next door neighbour say, 'Old Molly's cross, she's shut herself in, and hear how she's a talking to herself;' but it's not that, not that—

Now, Miss Annette, you'll want to be going home, but please read me the next hymn. It calls itself for a child, but it'll do for an old woman as well, and I want to remember it, to have it to say to Mrs. Bates's little ones, when she sends them in to me sometimes."

HYMN FOR A CHILD.

Not for you and me alone,
Not for two or three alone,
But for all did Christ atone.

Mocked and bound, and sore betrayed,
All the sin the world has made,
On His wounded form was laid.

See the crowd around Him stands!
Crucified by Roman bands,
 Nailed by feet, and nailed by hands.

Think how hard it were to bear
Sin, in which He had no share,
 Guilt, that Justice could not spare.

Think how hard it were to die
Scoffed at by the passers by,
 With bad words, and cruel eye.

Lord of all the Universe!
Him they mocked with voices fierce;
 And when dead His side they pierce.

O my Saviour! is it true
That whatever wrong I do
 Still should pain and grieve Thee too?

Yet I cannot comprehend,
Though so often I offend,
 Thou dost still remain my friend.

Lord! Thy mercy I entreat,
May my sins Thy pardon meet!
 Kneeling lowly at Thy feet.

“Amen,” said old Molly, with clasped hands
and bowed head, “and thank you, Miss.”

When Annette and Alma left the cottage their
eyes met, though they walked on without speaking
for some minutes. At length Alma broke the
silence, “I think I know what you mean now by
learning.”

“Yes, I often learn from old Molly’s patience
and cheerfulness upon so very little, and after

having lost so much. I really do often wonder at the uncomplaining endurance of the poor; in cold, and hunger, and poverty, still you often find a spirit of this kind. The things from which we never suffer, which we should think so hard if we did suffer from, are to them quite common, every day's occurrences. And even the indifferent characters are very kind often to each other; I have known a really dishonest man sit up night after night with a sick relation, making an attentive though rough nurse, after a long day's work."

"I suppose there must be quite two sides to them."

"Yes, perhaps; and also two ways of taking them, and some people take them at their worst, and others at their best. Then I think, Miss Alma, sometimes people forget the respect they ought to show to poor folks, and they can be very proud when that is the case."

"I don't quite understand that," said Alma.

"Well, I was always taught that we ought all to respect each other in our different positions."

"But they are not the same as you."

"No, and that is not what I mean. I remember how mother talked to me about it one day before I was confirmed. We had been talking about the meaning of 'To do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me.'"

“What *did* she say then?”

“She thought people so often forgot the real meaning, in the very way everybody was pushing on to get higher; that it separated us from those below us, and made them set against us; and just by our treating poor people without proper respect, we prevented ourselves from being of the natural use to them, and neglected our own proper duties, without being fit for others. I remember she said, ‘I’d rather have you good for the best as a farmer’s daughter than have you pretend to be a fine lady.’ And indeed,” said Annette laughing, “I should make a very indifferent lady.”

“You are very nice and dear, whatever you are,” said Alma, affectionately.

“Well, now, I shall go back refreshed, after having seen my old woman, and my walk with you. But mind now, dear, you’d best get out of the way of these bullocks, for they are in a hurry to get to their yard, as they are just come in from ploughing all day.”

Alma scrambled hastily up the bank of the narrow lane by which they had left the down, for she was hardly yet accustomed to those large Sussex oxen, which used to make her feel quite timid at first. Large red and black creatures, with

wide-spreading horns and mild eyes, on they came tramping and shouldering one another; six of them driven by a little boy, whose red tanned face showed his early exposure to wind and weather.

"Well, Sam," said Annette, "have the oxen been out long ploughing?"

"Yes," said the boy, nodding.

"Since when?"

"Nine o'clock."

"They must be hungry then."

"They be."

"And I daresay you are hungry too?"

"I be."

"And how does the reading get on, Sam?"

"Dun'no."

"Are you coming to school when ploughing's over?"

"Dun'no."

"Why, you must forget all you ever learnt, don't you think you can come sometimes to school?"

Sam considered a little. "Winter toime and o' Sundays."

"Well, I hope you will, but now go and give the bullocks their supper, and then yourself."

Annette looked with some pain after the boy as he went heavily on to the farmyard. "Poor little

fellow; that is one thing I should like to alter. They send the children out so young to work, that it is their only idea of life; then how is it to be wondered at that they can see nothing beyond providing for their bodily wants! They drudge along like the oxen, and are contented with little more than the beasts they have charge of."

"But surely some are better than that."

"Some may be better, and some may be worse, inasmuch as they ought to be better than animals."

"I know uncle has often said it was very uphill work trying to teach them."

"No doubt it is. But dear Miss Alma, if I might say so, that is just one of the things in which a young lady may help. I remember how Mr. Erle gave a lecture at the school one evening last winter, and he said, people might be astonished that he was going to talk to them about their own homes rather than anything new. He begged them to remember how England was all one great home, and how to keep any greatness, or its proper place with other nations, it must still continue united as a home. And then he pointed out how it was all made up of cities, and towns, and villages; and how even every cottage home, every separate family, might either add or take away just so much of its greatness. He reminded them how they all

knew this as well as he did ; but he wanted each individual man and woman to try by their own Christian lives to shew how they loved and respected their own cottage home, and what a pure and sacred feeling they ought to have towards it. There was a great deal more said besides—but, I think that your going among them and helping them to think of making even one or two homes more tidy and happy and pleasant, is doing something which is very important, but yet doesn't come of itself, but which those a few steps above them can put into their heads.

And now, Miss Alma, I must wish you good night, or I shall be sadly behind hand, which I don't want to be."

Alma walked thoughtfully home. It all seemed so little, a small speck of work in a corner of the great whole ; not at all what she longed to do. And yet Annette's advice was perfectly true and kind. Does not our country population make up a large amount of England's greatness, and is not much friendly intercourse and actual knowledge of each other needed to bring together in feeling those who are otherwise so far apart ? "We should all be better friends if we knew each other better," used old Molly to say, and I think she was right.

That evening Aunt Letty rejoiced Alma's heart by telling her they had settled to ask her brother John for the winter holidays.

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD SAILOR'S STORY.

“ If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.”

THE beautiful autumn weather had suddenly changed to a gale, which quieted down after several days into a cold stillness, in which fog and frost alternated, and ended at length in a heavy fall of snow. The downs were thickly covered in parts, and were everywhere wrapped up in mist and gloom.

But one fine Tuesday morning, early in November, Annette Wray sent to ask Alma if she would like to drive with her and Lydia, while the sun, for the first time for many days, was shining brilliantly. They had an errand to do at a house some way off, from whence they could walk down to the Gap, and have a glimpse of the sea.

There was something very fairy-like to Alma in

the glorious sight of those downs all folded up in snow. It looks as if the whole country had been struck by a magic wand, with everything so large and so near, each little farmstead and barn only standing like a few dark specks on the dazzling snow ; yet so white, so solemn, so peaceful, as if it might sleep for a hundred years without a single change.

When they came nearer to the Gap, the silent downs sloped down towards the sea on either side ; with the black furze bushes only to be seen here and there, and the white lighthouse above, whiter than anything except the pure, spotless field in which it stood,—while a brilliant sun shone full in their faces, sparkling on the now melting snow, flashing and glancing on the waves, which fell on the shore in one long glittering line, their breaking sound followed by a silent hush, until the sea had again gathered up its strength for advancing on the shore.

Annette and the girls sat down in a warm sheltered nook, where the snow had long since melted, enjoying the sunshine and the beauty of the scene, and even Lydia was satisfied for once to wait and gaze in silence. At length Annette rose to go away ; she looked around—yes, there was old

Master Castle on his watch as usual. He came towards them, raised his hat, but did not speak, and then turned again on his short walk.

After they had passed him, however, Annette turned, he had called her name. "Are you going to the house, Miss Anne?" he asked.

"Yes, I was."

"You won't find them there."

"What do you mean, Master Castle?"

He walked slowly up towards her, and Annette then noticed he looked very grave and pale. "The children, I suppose you want them. They are not there. Etty and Teddy went away this morning,"

"Oh! I'm sorry," said Annette, "but Mrs. Davies I suppose—"

She stopped, seeing how the old man's face had fallen, as he said slowly, "Haven't you heard, Miss Anne?"

"Heard what?" asked Annette, in alarm. "Oh! Master Castle, what is the matter?"

"Then you don't know, miss—" and the old man braced himself up as if for some great exertion, "that poor Esther Davies—she's dead."

"Oh, Castle! what can you mean? We did not even know she was ill."

"No, it's all so sudden like. But we are well nigh broken hearted down at the station; men and women too."

"But, what is it,—what has happened? do tell me," said Annette, greatly shocked.

The old man raised his telescope to look at a distant barque, but his hands trembled so much that he put it down again. "The Lord knows what He does, Miss Anne. But you know this terrible foggy weather, with snow too,—it's bad for coming over the Head o' nights. This day week it was;—they were short of things at home, and Davies he wanted them from the town, and at first she wouldn't go, but somehow she did, poor girl, after all. And then—"

"Yes, Castle, what then?"

"As she came back she must have missed her way at the turn to the lighthouse, and walked straight away for the sea—and over the cliff."

The girls exclaimed in horror, "But did nobody know—didn't her husband go to meet her? How was it found out?"

"The first I know, Miss Anne, was when I went home from my watch, I heard them poor little dears a'crying in the dark. Mother wasn't come home, and they were cold and hungry,—and their father had locked 'em up, and was gone to meet her. So I made a shift and got in somehow at the window, and got 'em their suppers as best I could, and then put 'em into bed. Davies had gone out

with Baker and a lantern, and called and hollowed for a long time, but they heard nought. So Davies, he made sure she must have gone to her sister's for the night, and went to his bed quite comfortable,—but they hadn't set eyes on her there,—and in the morning—but in the morning—well, we all went to look for her, and then we found her. She had got dazed like, I expect, poor girl, and lost her way."

"But could nothing be done?" said Annette, shuddering.

"Ah! Miss Anne, you can't bring back the dead to life. She lay just as she fell, and had never stirred again; the basket she carried had never left her hands. But she was a good woman,—and it's an awful thing. I've seen strong men go overboard, poor fellows! but a woman,—to be took so sudden—"

Annette shed tears of real grief; then she presently said, "And those poor little children, Castle?"

"Davies has sent them, Etty and Teddy, to their aunt's, and Willy he keeps with him; the baby, Mrs. Baker has got here."

"And Mr. Davies himself?"

"Ah, Miss Anne! its a hard thing for a man to lose his wife in this way, and Davies, he was

terrible cut up at first, as well he may be, for she was a good wife to him, though he's rather a hard man to deal with. And to say the truth, miss, I take it the poor girl gave her life to save him, for he is sometimes for drink when he gets away, and maybe that was why she would go. But Esther was a good woman, and has kept her husband straight, and she was a'most like a daughter to me,—and oh ! they poor little children, it's downright heartbreaking."

The old man walked away with his telescope hanging idly under his arm, when he told this piteous story, which he had spoken in a low dull voice, like one in a dream.

When Annette moved, it was to go into the house to enquire after the poor motherless baby.

Even Lydia was awed into silence.

And so for the first time within her remembrance, Alma had come in the way of one of those awful, unanswerable mysteries, which yet so often cross and perplex our paths. The wife and mother so needed taken away ; life, happiness, and the home whose beauty she had admired, all swept away at one stroke, all swallowed up in one unexpected desolation.

It was only too like the story of the Sand

Dunes! And what would it be, all, without the one Eternal Hope?

* * * * *

And old Master Castle paced slowly along on the watch, and as he walked his heart was very sore, as the thoughts passed through his mind, "she was a'most like a daughter to me,—poor Esther—dear, good woman—dead and gone! and oh! the poor little children. Dear girl,—they talk of 'sleeping in Jesus,' and if it were not that, I never saw nothing more like it."

And as the short winter afternoon changed into dark, and from the far-out tide there came up a hushed sound of the waves on the distant sand, the old man still paced along in the same thought.

"I am the resurrection and the life, the Parson said, as he met us at the churchyard gate; '*I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord,*' that sure must be it. And yet that same Lord groaned when he came to the grave of his dead friend! And yet too, the man who lay on his bosom and loved him so, says when he saw him afterwards, He was so awful, 'I fell at His feet as dead!' Yet the Lord took him by the hand, and lifted him up. And poor Esther, dear woman,—she too 'fell at his feet as dead.' And wouldn't that

same pitiful Lord lift her up too, poor soul ! and speak to her so kind, and carry her in His arms ? ”

And as the stars came out in the dark November evening, the old man still slowly paced up and down, but all the while the sound still whispered in his heart, “ I am the resurrection and the Life ! ” until it grew louder and more distinct, and rose at length like the rising sea into a glorified strain ; “ I am the resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord. I am He that liveth and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen ; and have the keys of hell and of death.”

* * * * *

Master Castle was a very simple-minded old sailor, but whenever he was in sorrow or perplexity, he had the habit, which now came to him very naturally, of turning to his Bible for any approach to consolation.

CHAPTER VI.

—

ALMA AND JOHN.

THERE are steep narrow roadways up the South Downs, which have been there time out of mind. The chalky line looks at a distance like a white thread laid zig-zag on the face of the hill. Broad ruts have been worn for years, and deepened into channels by the rains that stream down them in winter; while the hoof tracks from horses and cattle have grown into deep holes, smoothed down in summer into rough, uneven steps, toilsome and often dangerous, except to feet that are accustomed to tread them. No bullocks however were to be seen tramping and sliding down their usual track to-day, but in their stead two riders were slowly creeping up the ascent. One is a slight looking girl, on a small but sturdy pony; her companion, a strong-made young man, on a steady looking cob.

There was a ruddy glow of health on his hand-

some features, and an air of alert activity pervaded his well set limbs.

“ And so these are what you call roads in this part of the country ? I suppose one may learn something every day, but there isn't much labour spent upon this one. Is it the best way up the downs ? ”

“ Oh no ; there are better roads than this.”

“ Then why did you take this one ? ”

“ Because it is one of the prettiest ; but this is little better than a bullock track, very few carts ever come up and down here.”

“ Well, as I don't want to carry back the parson's horse lamed for life, I suppose I had better walk up, for these holes are deep enough to break his leg, and mine too. Your pony's small hoofs can pick a footing on the edge, if you are careful.”

They were a pleasant-looking pair, these two young people, and talked gaily together as they went along. For in the middle of the short December days John Sherbrook had arrived, and the little village of Ivyton seemed directly to arouse a little out of its usual quiet. Alma had felt some anxiety about the meeting between her brother and his new relations, but somehow nothing had happened exactly as she had expected. She had been afraid that Aunt Letty and the hand-

some thoughtless youth would be such a contrast to each other, that there would arise constant causes of opposition between the two; but, as it was, everything had turned out in just the opposite way. Whether it was from his good looks and his ready laugh, or because he possessed a store of fun, and a never-failing supply of those animal spirits in which she was wholly wanting, Aunt Letty was amused with him at the first, and began at once to look upon his failings in an unusually indulgent manner. But he was more distant and grave with the grey-haired old clergyman, and they seemed rather suspicious of each other on both sides. "How strange it is," thought Alma; "here was I so afraid about this brother of mine, and yet he is more at home with Aunt Letty in seven days, than I have become in so many months!"

And now, as the brother and sister were creeping up the hill together, they were conversing about many things that had happened since their last meeting; when presently John said, "And how do you get on here, Alma? It's a pretty enough place to see, but it must be *uncommon* quiet, and rather stupid and slow when you come to stay here long."

"Oh yes, very quiet," said Alma, "but I don't

mind that in general, I rather like it sometimes, and it was such a nice rest at first after being at school."

"All very well for holidays, but how shall you like it for a home?"

"I should like it very well if you were here at home, too."

"That doesn't matter; for it can't be much of a home to me. I've got my year at Sandhurst to think about, and then I may be sent off, goodness knows where."

"Don't let's talk of that; I can't bear to think of it. Besides you haven't even passed yet for the army."

John made a face of disgust, and then said, "But Alma, do you like it better than the holidays you spent in London with Lady Anstey? for you know she said you might go there again some time."

"Oh! much better; I shouldn't like ever to live in London."

"You might be worse off. But how absurd these old people are; the old lady so correct and prim, though I must say she's very polite to me; but the old Parson—why he's a regular book-worm!"

"Oh! Johnny! they've been so very kind to

me, and Uncle Matthew especially so. He's a delightful man."

"*Uncle Matthew!*" echoed John, in a mocking tone. "You don't expect me to call him that. It's too ridiculous. But, I say, Alma," he added, after a pause, "why didn't you like the time you spent in London?"

"It's all very well when you want to be amused for a time, but I shouldn't like to live in London."

"That's because you are a little recluse; or because you aren't used to it."

"No; and yet perhaps it is partly use; but I never could like it."

"Well, what good reasons can you give? You said you liked seeing pictures, and hearing music, and going to the theatre, and seeing sights——"

"Stop! I liked some things and I didn't like others. Oh! it was so wearisome going out for Lady Anstey's morning shopping, or for her afternoon drive, and I was tired with seeing all the pretty things, and tired with all the crowd of people passing backwards and forwards, and with all the noise and bustle."

"Well, was that all?"

"Not all; but I somehow always feel so oppressed in London, with the sense of the thousands of human beings hurrying along, people

with whom one has nothing to do, and whom one cannot approach ; the dirty, worn, beggarly people whom one looks down upon I confess, but who though they are fellow creatures, are divided from me as if they belonged to another creation."

"You're a little philanthropic humbug!" said John, "But if you had anything to do in London, you would soon get over such feelings, you would be just as busy as other people, and so wouldn't think about them so much. They would sink down to their proper level."

"Now Johnny, I don't like being called that," said Alma, hastily, "besides, these people are already down at what you would call their proper level, and I am so far removed from them, and am unable to approach them, or give them a helping hand in any way. It was to me like two different worlds."

"Perhaps if you lived really in London, you would find you had more to do with them than you would wish, and that you didn't like what you saw of them. Did I ever tell you of a friend of mine going through the Seven Dials, and how he felt?"

"What was that? I don't remember."

"He had determined to walk all through London, and had just entered the Seven Dials,

which he had a curiosity to see. Hardly had he gone many yards, when a respectable-looking kind of man came running after him, warning him that he was going into a most disreputable place, in fact, a den of thieves, of Jews, Turks, and Heretics, I suppose, where he would in no wise be safe against losing all his property, or being beaten and perhaps murdered into the bargain. No policeman dare show his face there. So he thought it best to beat a retreat, for they were all thieves and ruffians of one sort or another. I wonder how you would have felt towards them: should you have been as philanthropic then?"

"I don't know, Johnny; I can't say. I know I shouldn't have liked it at all; and I should have felt very sad, and very angry with them."

"Why *sad*, Alma?"

"Oh! because they would seem so shut off from better things by a gulf, and that none could cross to them."

"Exactly so; once a thief, always a thief," murmured John.

"I remember so well, one day, when I was with Lady Anstey three years ago, I was sitting reading in the carriage, waiting for her at a shop door, when a wretched, haggard-looking woman thrust her head forward, begging, and pushing

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forward a few tawdry ornaments. She had a poor puny-looking baby crying on the other arm ; both were hardly protected by her rags from the cutting east wind, for it was a bitter cold day. She was weak and trembling, and said she had had no food from the day before, and indeed she looked as if it was true. I was just turning to ask the coachman to find me a few pence, when Lady Anstey came bustling out, gave her orders, and we were whirled away in a moment. I believe she talked to me all the way home, and told me I was encouraging vagrancy and imposture ; in fact, she quite scolded me, and ended with saying the woman was not hungry, and the baby, no doubt, was borrowed for the day, to excite compassion."

" Very likely it was."

" Perhaps it might be. But there were we, in a comfortable carriage, with wraps and furs to keep out the slightest cold, and going to a luncheon with every luxury, and this poor wretch, shivering and starved, and we would give no help of even a few pence. I could quite have cried, the contrast was so painful."

" But you know it would be impossible to give to every beggar you meet."

" Yes, I know that ; but such things make me so miserable, that I feel if I lived in London, I

must be doing something among them," she ended, in a low tone.

John was silent for a few minutes, and presently he asked, "And these country people, have you much to do with them."

"A good deal, and I hope to have more."

"Well, I should have thought you had enough to do; you were stitching away at a brat's frock all yesterday, in order to make it fit to appear in church on Sunday."

Alma laughed, "Oh yes; that's because it had a very helpless mother. But in general the people are very nice, and like me to go among them."

"Well! here we are at the top at last," said John, proceeding to remount the old horse, which he had led up so carefully. "And I do call that jolly."

"*Jolly* indeed!" said Alma, laughing, "*I* call it beautiful, and that suits it much better, even though it is December."

They paused, and turned to the view on both sides. It was a mild winter's day, and sun haze and a strip of silver sea were softly melted together round the horizon; here and there a village church or windmill, stood up faintly against the grey downs, slanting down to the farmstead in the large

bare fields. Near them, sheep and cattle were wandering, and cropping the fine turf, where the gossamer lay thick on the gorse bushes, and a solitary harebell still fluttered in the wind. Down below, in the tract of level country, the marshes stretched away till they reached the distant woods on one side, and the sea on the other, lines of purple and grey marking out the desert waste of the shingly bay, till it faded in the distance, while the towers on the shore were standing as emblems of peace, still and quiet, in a pale gleam of winter sunshine.

The brother and sister watched a changing gleam for some minutes, when Alma said, "I think we had better be going on now, John."

"Very well. Can you get up a canter with that little animal? What is his name?"

"Crusty; he's the baker's pony, and Uncle Matthew borrowed him for me to-day. He trots along fast enough with his cart, but whether he can canter I don't know. Now then, Crusty!"

They set off; the old gig horse was soon stretching across the soft springy turf, with long strides, and the little brown pony, with its bristling mane, was so inspirited, that at length it broke into a rough canter as it bounded along. And the girl laughed, and her spirits rose, and her heart

beat joyously as the fresh sweet air of the downs blew in her face, riding onwards towards the sea and sky; so happy too to be riding with John.

"It really was very kind of Uncle Matthew to lend us these two for a ride to-day; he said he wished me to have a scamper with you on the downs before the weather broke, as he expected it would do in a few days. Wasn't it now?"

John laughed. "You speak as if he was a racer. You should see the horses I have at Lady Anstey's. But did he want old Rubric to-day?"

"Well, he did really want to have driven in to town to change some books from the library, but he put that off, just on purpose for us."

"That *was* very good-natured of him, when his dearly-beloved books are concerned. I really wonder it occurred to him."

"You ungrateful boy! I'm sure Uncle Matthew never forgets me, books or no books."

"Yes; but you are very different from a troublesome fellow, as no doubt he thinks me, and he must wish to get me off his hands as soon as possible."

"Oh! I'm sure,——" began Alma.

"No Almy, don't be sure. But I shan't trouble him long. And now let's get on again."

It was time, for presently a heavy drop fell into Alma's eye, which was followed by another; and

then began that fine thick drizzle that blots out the distance with a grey solid cloud, and blurs the nearer objects. They had not thought of this. Neither knew their way very well, John had never been there before, and they felt very doubtful as to the direction in which they were going, when they found themselves descending the hill instead of keeping on the top. The pony began slipping and sliding on the short wet turf, and old Rubric went with lagging steps. "Give Crusty his head," shouted John, "the little animal may know his way better than you do." Crusty, left to himself, scrambled upwards till they had again reached the top of the down, but there was the same grey drizzle all round, without a single landmark to guide them, only furze bushes scattered about, each one like the other. "What was that," said Alma. "Oh!—thunder; and here we are out on the downs, without any shelter. What can we do?" Now Alma wasn't a coward in general, but she was timid in thunder, and she didn't relish the idea of being drenched through, with a storm on the downs, more than most people. "Why, get on as fast as we can to be sure," said John, "we shall come to somewhere. Don't creep that way!" They went on at a quick trot, very much at random, looking out for one of the descending paths.

"Is that a stack, or what?" presently said John.

"No, one of the old barrows, but it may be at the turn down hill."

They reached it, and to Alma's relief in riding round it perceived a wall and door in one side of the mound. "Here! though it's rather like an Ogre's den, it may shelter us for a bit," said he, leaping from his horse, and opening the door. "Come in, Almy!" She bent her head at the low entrance, and looked into the darkness. A large black Sussex cow meekly moved aside to let the intruders pass. "Now, if you don't knock out your brains against the top, you're all right here, Alma. It's a novel kind of cowshed, you see."

"Well, I'm very glad of the shelter, whatever it is," said she, "for I'm afraid it will be a bad storm."

The black masses of clouds swept across the marshes, and every now and then from their folds came a swift lightning flash, whose momentary brilliancy made them feel the next instant how the winter day-light was already failing, while the rain pelted down in chilling torrents. The thunder re-echoed with that roll that shows how it passes on from one hill to another, whilst the black rounded heads of down stood out plainly now and then, and were again quickly wrapped in the thick

mist which came pressing more densely around, until it seemed almost to touch the turf in front of where they stood.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid it will be getting quite dark," said Alma, "and I really don't know the best way home."

"Best or not, we shall have to find the way somehow, even if we have to go on to the high road at the end of the downs."

"I'm afraid they will be getting quite frightened about us at home, especially now there is a thunder storm."

"Well, don't keep watching it so, you silly child; you only make yourself nervous. They will get over it, and a thunder storm is sure to come to an end some time. Come away from the door."

"Yes, I will," she said faintly, and moved further into the vaulted stable; and then to turn her thoughts to something else besides the storm, began again, "But John, do tell me what you meant by——"

"I say," broke in a snarling voice, "what are you a-doing, a hinterrupting of my cow? Look sharp and come out, will ye! I don't want none on ye to be poking in here that way."

The speaker suddenly appeared in the entrance,

his keen grey eyes twinkling into the darkness, with sharp nose and chin, pressed forward against the door-post. As he stood there, with a battered black hat on his head, a dingy green smock streaming behind him in the wind, and a pair of grey-stockinged thin legs, ending in heavy boots, he looked like some strange bird of prey, peering into the blank space before him with evil omen. "Wherever did you drop from, you ugly old vulture?" murmured John in an under-tone. "Oh, if you please," began Alma, "we don't mean to do any harm, but the storm came on so badly, and we wanted to find a shelter till it left off a little; so, as we saw this place, we turned in here. I didn't think we could be doing anything wrong, just waiting here."

"Ye might have known it wasn't your'n." he said rudely. "You fine young chaps come up from the sea-side, and plays your antics and has your lunches up here, and sets your nags to eat up my hay and oats, and never thinks what harm you does to us poor folks, who have been at all the pains to gather them up."

"Oh dear," said Alma, "we've done nothing of the sort, our ponies haven't touched a bit of your hay; and indeed we are not fine folks from the sea-side, such as you mean."

"What be ye then? I see by your talk you are a young miss; but what's he? and where be ye from?"

"From Mr. Erle's, at Ivyton."

"Oh! Parson Yar!; I've heard of him," remarked the old man. "And what brought ye here?"

"We wanted to take shelter, as I said, from the storm."

"Be ye afraid, eh?"

"Well, I did not like the storm."

"If you're so timersome, I suppose you must stop at present; I'll let you be. I shall come back again and see after the cow, and lock up."

He was turning away, when Alma asked, "Can you tell us the best way down? We came up at Ivyton, but that way is so steep to go down."

"Yes, 'tis; don't go back, but keep on about half a mile, and you'll see your way down before you."

"Thank you," said Alma; "please tell me your name."

The old man turned round and stared at the 'young miss.'

"Why do you want to know my name?" he said in a surly tone, "Why it's 'Spring,' to be sure."

"Do you belong to Ivyton?"

"No."

"Do you live near here?"

"Well, I live down below, in what they call 'the Old Boat.'"

"Oh yes, I've seen that from the top here."

"Have ye? well, I shall come back again and lock up," said he, as he turned from the door, and went down the hill.

John had taken no share in the conversation, but while deliberately biting a straw, had allowed Alma to speak for herself; but when the old man had disappeared below the edge of the hill, he burst into a loud laugh, and remarked, "So that is a specimen of your polite country people! I never saw such an old crab in my life. Do you mean they are all like that?"

"No, not at all; but John, they really are glad to see me, and I don't believe this old man belongs to the place properly."

"So very civil to a young lady, to allow her to stay in an old cow-shed, instead of turning her out in the storm! You may stop if you like!" Then John mimicked the old man's attitude and voice, till Alma was obliged to laugh, in spite of herself.

After about ten minutes the storm began to abate ; and as it was hopeless to wait until the rain should entirely cease, both began to think it the wisest plan to make the best of their way homewards. Alma did not like at all descending the long hill, where Crusty's hoofs made many a long slide and scrape down the chalky road, now quite greasy with the violent rain that had streamed down it.

As they came out on the bare fields at the foot of the down, the light was already dim, but Alma now knew the direction well enough. They had a rapid ride home along the high road, which made her feel both dry and warm. And when they had turned into the little Ivyton lane, now quite dark between its deep hedges, Alma said, laughing, it was very well that both Rubric and Crusty knew their way so thoroughly, for certainly neither she nor John could have found it.

Aunt Letty had been rather alarmed at the idea of their being out so late in the dark ; but the storm had not been so severe at Ivyton as out on the Downs. John gave such an amusing account of the little old man and his sudden appearance, and mimicked his snarling voice and rude manner in such a comical way, that Aunt Letty and Alma laughed again and again, and they had altogether

a very merry evening, It was only Mr. Erle who looked rather grave, (at least so Alma thought,) as he remarked that if it was an old man of whom he knew something, he was by no means an admirable character.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD BOAT.

“ BECCA ! I say ; you hunt back them fowls out of the grass, or we shall have ’em all taking to the woods, and lose ’em sure enough. Look sharp ! for there’s like to be a storm coming up. Where’s your Daddy ? ”

“ I don’t know, unless he’s cutting up some wood at the back, or gone after Blackbird.”

“ Well, be off after the fowls, girl, go and drive ’em in, don’t leave none out for the foxes.”

“ Oh yes ; I’ll see to that well enough,” said Becca, tramping off into the long straggling grass, that grew in one of the green roadways at the foot of the downs. The other speaker was a black-haired gipsy-like woman, with a red handkerchief tied over her head, which rendered still more prominent a very harsh set of features of an unpleasing expression.

Becca hunted back the fowls, and lingered to pick up an armful of wood. When she came back near to the door of the building that could hardly be called a cottage, (for it looked like a collection of odds and ends and broken planks, with an old boat stuck on the top,) she called out, "Mother! there's a young lady and gentleman coming down the road."

"Not here, folks never come this way."

"Yes, but they are; for they're coming down the road, I say."

"Down the road perhaps, but not to us."

"I tell ye they are though," persisted Becca; "I heard 'em say so, as I went after the fowls. Look ye, here they be coming quite nigh."

"I see, and I wonder what they want," said the old woman surlily, retreating within the cottage door, and proceeding to settle herself in her chair beside the fire.

After a few minutes a low knock was heard, and Becca half opened the door. "Is this Master Spring's cottage?"

Becca nodded.

"May I come in?"

Becca opened the door just wide enough for the young lady to squeeze in. The dim light inside showed indistinctly an old woman sitting before the

fire, a tolerable sized room, in a very rubbishy, untidy condition, and some dirty furniture, from the midst of which a chair was with difficulty provided for the visitor.

"A cold day, miss!" said a harsh voice from under the red handkerchief; "would you like to come near the fire?"

"Thank you," said Alma; "we were taking shelter the other day from a storm in Master Spring's cow-shed, and he told us we might come and see his cottage if we liked."

"Indeed, miss!" said the harsh voice, and then followed a pause.

"Do you belong to Ivyton parish?"

"No, we was once there, but not now."

"What village do you belong to now?"

"Well, not to none; but I suppose we've a right to be here if we like;" said the old woman, staring at Alma.

"Oh yes, of course; but I suppose you are rather lonely here, with no neighbours living near you."

"Well—yes; but I don't know that we wants 'em," she said rather rudely.

"It must be pleasant to see them sometimes, I think."

The old woman made no answer, so that Alma

felt rather at a loss, and turned very shy; while looking round for something to say, her eyes fell for the first time on two little children, whom she had before overlooked in the darkness. They were very neatly dressed, and formed a great contrast to the untidy look of the room.

"Are those your children?" asked Alma.

"No; but *he's* their grandfather," said the old woman, nodding towards the door.

The two little ones in question slowly got up and came to the stranger lady, when a little hand was slid into hers, and a pair of sweet blue eyes looked up confidingly into her face. "Why, I think I've seen you before somewhere," said Alma. "Oh surely it's little Teddy Davies, whose poor mother——"

"Yes miss," said Becca hastily interrupting, "this is Teddy, and that's Esther."

"Poor little dears! How do they come here?"

"I'm their aunt, and their father sent them here to me."

"Then they live here I suppose. Oh, I must tell Miss Annette, she'll like to know. You remember Miss Annette, don't you little ones?"

"Oh yes," said Esther, "she taught me to knit."

"Oh yes;" said Teddy, "she brought us some apples."

Alma lifted Teddy up on her knee, and the little fellow was presently chattering away to her in a confiding manner.

The old woman in the red handkerchief looked at them in a surly fashion, while little Esther cast sidelong glances at her, with rather an alarmed expression. "We've no room for children here, that's plain to see, is'nt it miss?"

"Well, there does not look much, certainly," said Alma, glancing round.

"And Becca, she's lots to do; too much to be bothered with children."

"That's my look out," said Becca; "and they're very good children, and *no* bother, and here they shall stop."

"We shall see," laughed the old woman provokingly.

"I suppose their father sent them here," said Alma.

"Yes miss; and of course I shall take care of my poor sister's children; I could'nt turn them out as *she* wants me."

"And pray, what will Jack Standfast say, when you know you promised to marry him next time he came home? You say you're so fond of him, you won't break your word to him I suppose," she added sneeringly.

"I didn't promise," said Becca, growing very red; and then she bent down over little Esther, smoothing her hair rather roughly, and turning to Alma said again, in a low voice, "I couldn't turn 'em out, now could I miss?" The rough-looking untrained girl cast a glance in the face of the other with such a longing for sympathy, that Alma felt forced to answer, "No, I don't see how you could. Does your father like them?"

"Oh yes; he doesn't mind so long as Mr. Davies pays for them; he's got rather fond of them."

"Yes," grumbled the old woman, "he doesn't know the trouble of them, and why couldn't Davies send them to the Union if he can't keep them himself? I tell Becca she should send them there."

"And I tell ye I shan't, mother," said Becca defiantly, "so you needn't talk."

Poor little Esther looked frightened and rather inclined to cry, while Teddy, in a confiding way, began showing the young lady the contents of his pocket; from which, amongst other things, he drew forth a marble, which he laid in her hand, "Big Brother Billy gave me that, when he came to see us, and he told Esther not to cry." And then there was a top brought out, which he liked

spinning. Old Master Castle had given him a piece of string to spin it, and here it was all safe. And last of all there was a penny, which father gave him last week.

“Does father come and see you then?”

“Oh yes, sometimes; and here’s a dolly he’s given me;” said Esther, holding up one for admiration.

Presently Alma began to think she had better go away, for low grumbling tones were still heard from beneath the red handkerchief, and she did not wish to stay and hear a prolonged dispute. Besides she had left John outside, and he would be growing impatient of waiting; so telling Teddy she would come to see him again some time, she took leave of the old woman, who hardly even turned her head; while Becca, with cheeks redder than ever, held open the door without speaking.

How painful was the contrast to Alma, between the dark untidy little cabin in which she now met with these poor children, and the cheerful little room whose perfect neatness and comfort had impressed itself on her mind as a model of a sea-side home. There was yet more difference between the mother they had lost, with her loving watchfulness

and careful training, and the surly disreputable-looking old woman who was mistress of the cabin. Becca looked rather rough and uncouth, though she was kind and affectionate to the children. Alma felt very sorry for them, poor little things; and she resolved soon to come and see them again.

But where was John? She did not see him, and called him several times without answer. At length, going round the house, she heard voices, and presently perceived him in earnest conversation with Master Spring. The old man was cleaning a gun, over which John was bending, while examining it intently with an observant air. Alma heard the old man say, "Now sir, I think she's done; and you can take aim with her as straight as straight; and the hares and rabbits they run across my——" But as the young lady appeared in sight, Spring suddenly stopped with "Good morning, miss." John started, and lowered the half-raised gun.

"I'm ready now, John," said Alma; "I'm afraid I've kept you a long time waiting."

"Very well, go on; I'll follow."

She lingered, but John again bidding her go on, she walked slowly forward.

"You shall have her there all right," said old Spring, with a nod and a wink. The words were half heard by Alma, and she remarked, when her

brother joined her, "I don't like that old man's look, Johnny, what did you want with him?"

"Only a little friendly talk."

"Nonsense! *you* didn't like his look a few days days ago; he looks so underhand. And why had he got a gun, what should he want with it?"

"Why shouldn't he have one, eh?"

"I don't know, but what good can he do with it?"

"Oh, he said they lived lonesome like, and he wanted a gun to protect his property. It's no business of mine."

"But John," said she, looking hard at him, "you were not asking for it, were you?"

"Well, I never saw such a pattern of curiosity as you are," said John, laughing, "I really can't answer such silly questions. Why may I not take up a gun without you looking so alarmed?"

"But John," she broke in, standing still to make her words more attended to, "I am afraid of your doing something you ought not. I'm quite sure Uncle Matthew wouldn't like your having to do with old Spring about a gun. I fancy he must be one of the——"

John laughed aloud; it was too absurd for Alma to think he couldn't take care of himself; when a fellow was just going into the army, he was not to

be tutored by old Erle like a child. He talked so much of his own responsibility and his authority, that Alma's scruples were quite over-ruled. He kept repeating this, and a great deal besides, all the way home; and ended with desiring her not to make any mischief by talking about it, or he should go away to-morrow; until Alma, in a state of great perplexity, gave a reluctant acquiescence to his orders.

Becca Spring had another visitor that afternoon. A young man, in a rough seaman's dress, was slowly toiling up the steep worn track that led to the cottage. He was pushing with all his strength behind a small cart laden with coals, to help the shaggy little donkey which was slipping and stumbling along with its weight. When he was fairly within the roadway, he turned the donkey's nose into the hedge, swung one of the sacks of coals over his shoulders, and proceeded to tramp towards the cottage. At a well-known halloo, the door opened and Becca looked out. "I've brought you some coals, Becca; I thought you'd be glad of them in this cold weather. Where shall I put them?"

"O thank you, Jack. Put them in the shed."

He lumbered them down, and fetched two other sacks; and after disposing of them in like manner;

standing upright he shook the coal dust off his blue jersey, and remarked, "They are good coals, and your father can have as many more as he likes, only he must pay for them punctual."

"Yes, to be sure," said Becca.

"Where is he now?"

"I think he's gone after Blackbird; he was out here a while back, talking to a young gentleman. Will you come in and have a warm?"

Jack followed the girl in, and remarked, "where's the old woman?"

"Oh, I suppose she is gone out, she said she wanted some wood to be picked up."

Jack sat down, and began talking of his last voyage in the collier, to which Becca listened in silence, only occasionally making but short answers. However he did not seem to perceive this, but went on telling her of "the terrible night they had had yesterday fortnight, and how Captain Barton had almost thought the brig would have been beaten to pieces, though she really did behave beautiful. I can assure you Becca, sleep and food were only to be had by snatches, and little enough of them too, and Captain Barton he says to me——" but here the speaker broke off abruptly, exclaiming "hallo! who be you?" for a little face had looked enquiringly into his.

"That's Teddy Davies, one of my poor sister's children," said Becca.

"What? your sister Esther's. Poor little chap! hoist up, my man;" and Jack kindly lifted him on his knee.

Becca smiled, and showed him Esther also.

"Are they stopping with you?"

"Yes, their father sent them here."

"But why doesn't he keep them with himself?"

"Oh Jack! a coastguard can't look after children all day, and the women have got too much on their hands already. They've got the baby and the biggest."

"And how does your father like 'em?"

"Oh, he likes them well enough. Grandaddy and they are quite friends. Aren't they Teddy?"

The child nodded.

"Jack went on with his story:—"Well, as I was telling you Becca, the Captain he says to me he was satisfied, and he pays me down handsome; so I've got my wages and a little over."

"I'm right glad to hear that."

"And he spoke very kind, and said in course of time I ought to be good enough for mate; and moreover, as he wasn't going to sea again himself, he had recommended me as one to his friend Captain Francis. Only think Becca, if I get that berth.

He said some captains liked a mate to be a married man, they were all the steadier. But Becca, you aren't attending."

"Yes I be;" said Becca, bending down over Esther's pinafore, in which she suddenly discovered a large hole, which absorbed her attention.

Jack went on talking in great spirits, and made Teddy laugh with many a jolt and seesaw on his knee, until at length he rose to go. At the door he beckoned Becca to follow him, and pointing backwards with his thumb, asked, "how long do they stop?"

"I don't know; always perhaps."

"Who sees to them?"

"Why I do, of course Jack."

"Why doesn't the old lady?"

"Well now, do you think she'd like to do it," said Becca, "or what's more, do you think I should ask her to look after my own sister's children. I wonder at your thinking of it, knowing her ways as you do."

Jack looked rather vexed, and after pacing up and down several times, he said at last in a disappointed tone, "I came to tell you about the Captain and the money, and you don't seem to attend to it one bit, Becca."

"Oh yes Jack; what shall you do with the money?"

"*Do with it!*" repeated he; "why you know what I wanted to do with it. Don't you see it's enough for us to set up housekeeping with at Aunt Hyde's?"

Becca was silent for a moment, then she said very quietly, "It won't do Jack; you must put it by for a bit, only let it be somewhere safe."

"And what do you mean by that; where could it be safer than with you?" he asked impatiently.

"It can't be yet Jack, we must just wait a little longer."

"Now I do call that main hard on me,—you say 'wait, wait,'" said Jack passionately, "and because Davies sends his children to you, am I to go on waiting for ever! Why can't he find some one who would do just as well?"

"Not as *me*," said Becca firmly, "because they're my poor sister's children, and after their father, they belong to me more than any."

"Why, he could pay any woman, or he could send them to the poor-house, if he pretends he can't afford the money."

"And they shall not go there," again said Becca, "what would their poor mother have said to that? I'm ashamed of you, Jack!"

Jack paced up and down, his anger venting itself in abuse of Davies and his shabbiness, and

coastguards in general, till Becca at length laid her hand on him to check him.

“Come Jack, you’re not kind to-day; I am sure you were sorry enough for Davies and the poor children really,—do be reasonable.”

“Yes, *I am* sorry for them;” but because Davies has lost his wife, is that any reason I shouldn’t have mine? I can’t wait much longer,” he added angrily, “I shall have to look out for another girl before long, who will be ready enough to have me.”

Becca looked pleadingly in his face. “Jack! you know you only care for me, so don’t say such things. You used to be a kind man; only think of these poor children left motherless in such a terrible way. If they can’t go to their father, where I go to stay they must go too.”

“Do you mean it Becca, do you mean what you say?”

Becca bent her head with a half whispered “yes,” upon which Jack, white with passion, turned away saying, “Well then I must mean what I say, so goodbye to you, Miss Becca.”

“Jack! Jack! do stop!” she called after him; he did not stop, but set off dragging his donkey down the hill; he did not even turn to look back, or wave his hand as usual. Becca watched him to

the bottom of the hill, and till he was out of sight, when she went into the cottage, crying bitterly.

Little Teddy, who had been watching from the window, crept up to her whispering, "Aunt Becca, why was he cross to you? He was so good to me."

Yes, she knew it; and though she still cried, she folded her arms fondly round the child; Jack in his heart was good and generous, but yet, if he should carry out his threat!

"Perhaps he won't be cross long," said Teddy.

Becca smiled a little even through her tears, though there was a bitter pang in her heart. But she was aware of a growing and yearning affection to these orphaned children ever since they had come into her charge. Then there rose up before her, almost with the vividness of a living being, the remembrance of that dear kind sister Esther; and how when their own mother died, Esther being several years older, had comforted and taught her, taking almost a mother's place with her, and even after her marriage had kept her young sister with her for weeks together, in order to teach her the nice orderly ways she had brought from service into her own home.

And now, could not Becca repay some of this love and care towards these poor little ones, by trying to do her best to bring them up rightly while

she had them? Yes, that would be the right thing, for the present at least, she thought. Surely Jack couldn't mean it after all, only men be so *contrary-wise* sometimes, and just do the very thing they don't really want, because they've said so. But that don't make it righter for me to turn them off, and let them learn bad ways from the old lady. (And then Becca felt forced to blush for her father's ways too.)

But Becca was a brave spirited girl, and it wouldn't do for her to sit crying there; so driving back the tears and sobs as she could, she said to Teddy, "Now we must try and make the house neat as mother would have liked to see it; so you little ones must help me to tidy up the room." So little Etty was set to sweep, and Teddy helped in dusting; and though as Becca made up the fire she felt as if every coal had passed through Jack's hands, and she hardly liked to burn them, yet her tears came less bitterly, and by the time all was made straight, she was ready to wash the children's hands and faces, and to brush their hair smooth. "And now Etty dear, bring your book, and sit down and read to me a little, and I can mend your pinafore till Granddaddy comes in."

CHAPTER VIII.

EDUCATION.

JOHN had not spent many days at Ivyton, before Mr. Erle began to discover various qualities in his character of which he could by no means approve. Not wishing however to form at once an unfavourable opinion of his young guest, he determined to watch him carefully and quietly.

In the course of a few days the result of the military examinations was known, and the name of John Sherbrook was not amongst those who had passed. John at first professed to be very indignant; it was a piece of great unfairness, and it was old Berry's business to see that he passed; however of course he should pass next time, it was all quite easy a second time, and so nothing was really lost. So after a few days he seemed to care but little about the matter.

If the truth was told, John had never taken any pains to work at all, and though repeatedly warned by his tutor that failure must be the consequence,

he had been too indolent to make any real exertion. He had come from a very inferior school, through which he had passed learning as little as possible from books. He was only noted for bodily strength, and distinguished in athletic sports; in all other respects he held but a low place.

The change to a private tutor's was one which only further developed his faults, and led to no real growth of character. A number of youths were gathered together, and crammed with knowledge of all kinds so as to make the clever ones pass rapidly; while the duller boys were pushed through studies in which they could take no interest, and through literature and sciences which were forgotten as soon as their books were closed. When the hours of study were over, there was no sort of control over the pupils; for Dr. Berry was much too busy with overlooking examination papers, to be able or even to wish to enquire into the ways in which his young men spent their time of recreation. They had no facilities for playing football or cricket, or other manly games, so desirable at their age, and other amusements of a very expensive kind were in consequence sought after. For it cost a great deal of money to get out on long boating expeditions, to hire horses for constant rides or for frequent hunting, to play at billiards or cards, or gamble in

any way. And when these occupations had become too expensive, the youths idled about the town, swinging their canes and smoking cigars, and making remarks on the passers by, or else lounged in and out of the pastry-cooks', and stationers', or jewellers' shops, spending their money on trifles they did not want, and often leaving large bills unpaid when they went away for the holidays. There was every temptation to the careless and idle to become spendthrifts, and even those of more sparing habits and better principles found it very hard not to run into debt. What a training this was for any gentleman, and for those intending to enter the army a worse one could scarcely have been devised.

All these facts were well known to Mr. Erle from various sources. Had his own opinion been asked, he would have entirely opposed the idea of a tutor ; but all that had been settled by other relations long ago, and it was too late now to make a change. Yet the kind man determined to make as much excuse as he could for John. What could one expect from a youth who had never had any good home training, who had been left to grow up very much at random, and who might very possibly inherit a certain amount of unsteadiness from his father? But John was Alma's brother, and for

her sake he would try and be patient, and make allowance wherever he could.

In consequence he sought for an early opportunity of speaking openly to John about his future prospects.

The Vicar reminded him that the sum of money left by his grandfather to be spent upon his education, and for starting him in the army, might be just sufficient if he would be economical and steady, but there would be nothing beyond to spare. He had however a small addition when he reached the age of eighteen, John had then become the owner of a small sum, which was just large enough to provide him with a fair personal allowance; and if he should find his pay as an officer not enough to live upon, he had this addition to fall back upon. If he would but work with energy during the next year, and ensure his passing for the army, all might yet go well. But it must really depend on his own exertions. If he was too indolent or too volatile to work in the ordinary way required of gentlemen, he would certainly fail, in which case he must naturally lose his position, and fall into a lower social rank.

John appeared to listen very attentively, and asserted his intention of working '*like a brick*;' but he had heard it all often before, and the good

advice passed through his heedless mind without leaving any good results. In a few days it was all forgotten.

Meanwhile Alma was beginning to be afraid that John was rather too extravagant, and not going on quite as he ought; he never seemed to have any money of his own, and yet he was continually asking her for stray sixpences, or shillings, or half-crowns, which he would repay some time. It was all very inconvenient to Alma, who had but a very small allowance for her dress and other things. The odd thing to her was, how John could want to spend so much in a small place like Ivyton.

"Will you seal up this packet for me at once, Alma," said Mr. Erle, looking into the sitting-room one afternoon, "it must go by post to-day." "Oh yes, Uncle," said Alma, beginning to hunt about for a seal. "Here Johnny, can you lend me one."

He took a seal ring off his finger.

"What a handsome ring!" said she, as she returned it, "How ever could you buy such an expensive one?"

"Oh! all the fellows have seal rings;" said John, carelessly twisting it round on his little finger.

"Have they? but that must have cost a great deal. How could you get it?"

"Bought it," said John shortly.

Alma was puzzled. "I'm sure *I* couldn't afford it, and I should never think of buying such an expensive one; and besides, you never seem to have any money."

John laughed carelessly, "Well, I can always turn it back into money if I like, and then it is all the better for being expensive. Besides, I bought this with some money Lady Anstey sent me as a birthday present."

"But couldn't you have spent it better, you extravagant boy?"

At this point Aunt Letty entered with the enquiry, "Where were you going to-day, my dear?"

"Annette was going to take us some of the way to Westdown Farm, as Lydia was going there to spend New Year's Day, and John has never been in that direction before."

"Well then, you had better set off at once, as the days are so short, and not stop loitering any longer."

Alma went as she was advised; and after watching the young people out of sight, Mrs. Erle remarked to her husband, "I don't think Lydia Wray is improving Alma at all at present, she is getting more untidy and more wanting in method than ever."

"Indeed! I had not perceived it; I had hoped *you* had succeeded in improving her. She is always ready and obliging when I want anything to be done."

"Oh yes; but I see it in a variety of ways more than you do. They are so much together, and Lydia's influence cannot do any one good."

She was quite right in this part of her assertion, for certainly Lydia's character was not of the kind to influence any other girl rightly.

"But are they so much together?" asked he.

"Oh yes; a great deal, walking and chattering together,—at least till her brother came, and now Lydia runs after him."

"I haven't seen it; but for my part, I wish John was different, I can't say much for him."

"He's very good natured, but I'm afraid you find him very slow at books."

"Yes, he has no taste for reading; now Alma has a great deal."

"But how did you find him when you examined him in his classics?"

Mr. Erle shook his head; "He has about as much idea of classical accuracy as a chicken has of swimming, which is not saying much."

"Do you think he will ever pass then?"

"Well, I tried to spur him up to working with that aim, but I confess I doubt it."

“ And how did he like your examination, I wonder ? ”

Mr. Erle laughed. “ Oh, he was civil enough, but I don't think he liked it.”

(John had told Alma that he should have liked to pitch the books out of the window.—“ Only think, the old bookworm actually brought out three lexicons, to find the derivation of a word ! ”)

“ It must be very dull for John to be here,” she resumed, “ after having so many companions.”

“ Yes, I should have liked to compare him with other young men, if there had been any within reach. But I feel one must make all excuse for him ; he has had very little chance in his bringing up.”

“ How do you mean, Matthew ? ”

“ He has never had any settled home, but has had very unwise relations ; he has never had any one to whom he could look up or become attached, or could feel that anyone took a special interest in him. So that he has picked up all the bad things of school life, and has had no home influence to counteract this. A boy depends so much upon his home ; I think it makes him more than anything.”

“ The old story,” said she smiling ; “ you are always telling your Ivyton people to look to their homes.”

"Well, I do think, high or low, it is of the greatest importance. It was not in that way we were brought up, Letty ; to my mind there was better training in our youth."

"I think you are right there, my dear man." Then, after a pause, she went on ;—"But I wish so much the Trehernes were come home from abroad, perhaps they would have given our young people a little amusement, though perhaps they would not have had many parties yet."

"Yes, I wish they were back ; but you know we heard they were not returning till after the new year had well come in. I should have been very glad to ask for a little shooting for John. Boys always like shooting."

"But why not ask the keeper ?"

"I fancy Sir Richard would not like my doing that while he is away. But when they do come back, I want you to show Alma to Miss Treherne. It ought to be very good for her."

"She is such a shy thing. They met once at Nested school feast last summer ; Ella Treherne was very nice to her, but Alma wouldn't speak a word."

"She will in time. Don't expect young people to be perfect," he said laughing.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WHITE HORSE.

MEANWHILE the young party were accompanying Lydia on her way to High Down Farm. It was in a new direction, and John did not know where to guide Annette's pony, who however seemed very well fitted to choose his own way. Down rose behind down, and one slope after another, with little or no track to guide an eye unused to the scene ; while the keen east wind gave the same grey and white colour all around.

At length John and the pony came to a stand. " You must tell me the way to drive," he said to Annette, " for I haven't a notion of the way. What a place to be benighted in ; I'm glad I'm not driving in the dark, or in snow."

" Take the top of this rise, and I think we shall come to a track in time."

When the top of the down was reached, everything looked so unmarked that even Annette was

at a loss for a moment; but her well trained and observant eye following a gleam of sunlight over the silent down, enabled her to point out the faint signs of a distant path. "Happily there is no snow now," she said, "or I don't think I could find it, but I fancy we shall be right now."

"Wasn't there something you were singing last night Alma, about losing your way on the downs?"

"Yes, it was a rhyme old Molly taught me long ago."

"Oh I know it," said Lydia, and she began at once to sing:—

Over the downs on thymy grass,
To Westwood Park I had to pass,
And crossed my way, and lost my way;
Then straight it came into my mind,
I never shall the pathway find,
Although I search all day.

I wandered on, and then turned back,
Hoping by this to find the track,
But all in vain, in vain;
Then from the sea I turned my face,
But still my steps to that same place
Came back again, again.

For every clump of golden furze,
And every little knot of gorse,
Looked just the same, yes, just the same;
And in each little dingly nook
The cobwebs gleamed, and harebells shook
At every breeze that came.

The clouds were sailing in the sky,
The cawing rooks went slowly by,
And in the wind were blown ;
Some swayed to east, and some to west,
And then were lost behind the crest
Of the grey distant down.

And in the hollow where they fed,
The Sussex oxen, black and red,
Were slowly stamping on ;
With shoulders broad, and drooping head,
And wide spread horns and heavy tread
All tramping on and on.

I listened,—hoping then to hear
A sheep dog's bark, or voices near,
Or reach a farmstead soon ;
But not a distant house or tree,
And not a landmark could I see
Through all the afternoon.

I looked to left, and looked to right,
When sudden glimmering on my sight
The Sussex White Horse rose ;
I nearer drew, and followed till
I saw his head above the hill,
With mane, and eyes, and nose.

And now though twilight darkens round,
I feel that I the way have found,
For well I know the song ;
If you will always hold your course,
And follow by the old White Horse,
You cannot far go wrong.

“ But what is the White Horse ? ” asked John.

“ There he is ! there he is ! ” said Lydia, jumping
up, “ don't you see him ? ”

“ *Where ?* ” said John, doggedly staring.

“ *Why there, there !* ” and all the girls pointed in one direction to a distant down ;—“ *there he is ramping up the hill.* ”

“ *What, those two donkey’s ears ?* ”

“ *Donkey’s ears, Mr. John, you’re always thinking of donkey’s ears,* ” said Lydia saucily.

“ *Well, they are too big ; but it looks more like a horse when you see more of him,* ” said Annette, “ *but the ears certainly do look very long when first you see them.* ”

“ *And how long is the donkey’s tail ; how many yards ?* ”

“ *I can’t say positively, but you see by the height of the down it must be a great many yards.* ”

“ *And what is the good of him ?* ”

“ *People have different ideas about that, some say it is a memorial of a battle in Saxon times ; but my father and Mr. Erle think it a landmark, as there are so few differences here in the downs. It certainly must be of use as a landmark to the shepherds with their flocks out here, for even in slight snow it is distinctly marked by the outline on the face of the hill. And I have seen it too from a boat, and very curious it looks. There are several of them in England in other places you know.* ”

“ *Oh ! Johnny, you should see such a nice book*

that Uncle Matthew has about it ; it is called " The Scouring of the White Horse," and it's so interesting, I'm sure you would like it."

John however did not seem very enthusiastic.

" Oh ! I remember how much I liked that book, when Mr. Erle lent it to me," said Annette.

" Oh ! Alma, while I think of it, you take this book I brought for you ;" said Lydia, in an undertone ; and she began putting it into the pocket of Alma's jacket.

" Hullo, what's that ?" said John, looking over his shoulder.

" Never you mind, John, you'd no business to hear."

" Somebody has got ears too long, Mr. John," giggled Lydia in a flippant way.

John pretended to be very much offended, and tried to seize the book from Alma, which she did all she could to keep out of his reach.

" Oh pray don't be such children," said Annette, quite distressed ; " but please look after the pony Mr. John, or he may tumble down the hill."

When Lydia had been left at High Down Farm, and they were returning to Ivyton, Alma begged to get down at a point where she could turn off to visit old Molly, whom she had not seen for some time.

John shouted after her, "Give the old lady my compliments, and thanks for her song."

As Alma turned with an amused face to the cottage, she saw that old Molly was on the look out for her.

"Oh! my dear, it's so long since I've seen you, I'm so glad you're come at last; I've watched from my door many a day, and been looking for you."

"Well Molly, I've been very busy; besides, you know my brother is here. But how are you, Molly?"

"Pretty well, pretty well, my dear;" and then the old woman glanced round anxiously. Little Sally Bates was sitting on a low stool near her, nursing a very worn out doll. "There ducky, go and dance dolly to Mother. Run away, I don't want to play just now."

The child went after due deliberation, and turning back various times to pick up a bit of rag, or a pet stone or two.

Old Molly pushed to the door when she was gone, remarking, "Children always *must* stop, when you don't want 'em.

"But Molly, I hope nothing is the matter?"

"No Miss; nothing is the matter, at least not with me, my dear;—but people say queer things."

“What do you mean, Molly?”

“Don’t talk too loud,” said she in a whisper, “they hear so quick on the other side, the wall is so thin, and I think they listen.”

“But is anything the matter there?” said Alma.

Old Molly looked round, half alarmed, and then said, “People do talk to be sure,—but isn’t it a pity that such a nice young gentleman as Mr. John, should mix himself up with them Bateses? they’re a queer lot.”

“Why Molly, what do you mean?” asked Alma in surprise.

“Well perhaps it’s very wrong of me to say so, but I couldn’t help hearing some of the things they said when they were talking of Mr. John, and of ‘young John’s’ gun, and then about the parson, and laughing about his not knowing it.”

“What business had they to talk, I wonder? I don’t understand.” But Alma grew very red, as a very uncomfortable suspicion crossed her mind.

“Why my dear, perhaps you don’t rightly know, them Bateses are a terrible poaching lot, and all his time here, the parson has been right against them, just as much as Mr. Wray. I couldn’t but hear, when they talked loud, of a gun that somebody had brought, and Bates he were to give to Mr. John, and then I heard the young

gentleman asking for it. And I watched him out, carrying his gun ; yes,—your Mr. John my dear, and he's been for it time after time since then. He'll get no good along with poachers, you may be sure, but Bates he's gone out with him often, and I heard him talking yesterday of showing him the pheasants as they crossed what they called the Foxes' Walk."

"Oh! Molly," burst out Alma indignantly, "I'm sure John would never go after pheasants; and you mustn't believe stories against him. I believe he only goes down to the shore to shoot gulls."

"Well my dear, I only hope it'll turn out all right; but Bates's children they talk of having rabbits for dinner very often, and that Mr. John brings them in. Keepers are very sharp Miss Alma, and I always heard Sir Richard was mighty particular about his game."

Alma went home, feeling very uncomfortable; but she determined to speak to John as soon as possible, perhaps that very night. It was sad to her to feel many misgivings about her brother, and to find that the merry boy, who though he used to spend his pocket money so fast, yet often brought her some present in the holidays, had grown selfish and devoid of principle.

CHAPTER X.

TEDDY.

IF there was one tender place in the heart of old Master Spring, it was reserved for his little grandson, Teddy Davies. He had never cared very much for his own daughters, though he had often asserted, "I'm a very good father." But whether it was from any secret misgiving in his own mind, or from a kind of feeling for poor Esther's untimely death, he had from the first shown more affection towards the little boy, in the course of a few months, than in all the years his own children had spent with him. Esther and Rebecca might have grown up very much as they pleased, had it not been for the training of their mother, who for some years had managed to bring them up in orderly habits, and also to keep Master Spring tolerably respectable. The wonder was, how a nice and good woman should ever have been his wife, for Spring was not a good man by any means. Many stories were told about him, but what was

true and what was false no one exactly knew; one thing however was certain, that he was often a poacher, and that he lived in a very uncertain kind of way, without any regular employment.

Some years after his first wife died, Spring had married the gypsy woman who was now mistress of the cottage. From that time poor Becca's life had been a very hard one. For as Mrs. Spring said openly, "I want her out of my way, but whilst she's here, she must do the work." So Becca looked after the fowls, and kept all things as tidy as she could inside and outside, and did all the drudgery necessary to make the two ends meet; and in addition had to submit to all the grumbings and scoldings and taunts of a very bad-tempered and dishonest woman. There was many a jar and dispute between them, and Becca having a strong will of her own, was not faultless, and was apt to turn sullen, though she did not show this in words. She however very rightly resisted many of her step-mother's unscrupulous expedients, for Mrs. Spring was very deficient in the commonest truth or honesty, and often tried to tempt Becca into the same course; but the girl put away all such suggestions with honest indignation. Thus the life inside "the Old Boat" was not of a very happy description.

But when the children came to Becca, it was all different. "They be a light to my eyes," would the girl say to herself, and often did their presence make clear to her the marked difference between right and wrong. Often would she take them away, or withdraw their attention from a talk between Spring and his wife, "for they mustn't see them thieving ways,—and Teddy, he mustn't be used to bad words, and Etty mustn't learn to hang about idling." Becca's task however was often a very difficult one, and often did she feel oppressed with the difficult duty of guarding these little ones from the evil influences around them. Yet the children both softened and comforted her, and she was pleased to see her father's growing fondness for little Teddy, though it would often be shown in strange ways. "Well! he be a pretty one!" old Spring would say, when Becca had washed and brushed Teddy for Sundays, and the sweet blue eyes shone out from his flaxen curls, "he shall come and learn 'chuck penny' with me." And on Monday he would say, "And now Teddy we'll go and have a look at the sheep and lambs," for old Spring was shepherding a few sheep at the foot of the downs, and hoeing up turnips for their winter keep. Teddy would come hopping in among the woolly sheep, and stoop down his curly head

among them, and laugh merrily at the way in which they pushed each other from their feeding-troughs ; till sheep and lambs grew quite used to the little child who was having a game with them, and rolling the turnips about among them.

It was a pleasant surprise to old Spring when a small figure came skipping along, and a little hand was slipped into his own with some childish request, and he was always more gentle and honest while Teddy was with him than at any other time in the day. "We'll let that be," he would say with a knowing wink to Dick Bates, "no need for settling that just now," and some small act of pilfering was left undone for the time, because he did not like Teddy to know his ways. "He be as sharp as a needle, there's no deceiving him," Spring would say, when the frankness of an enquiry of Teddy's almost drew out the confession of a dishonest deed.

People talk of guardian angels as unseen visitants ; but are they not often placed around us in our own homes, in the shape of innocent children, to check the growth of evil, of impurity, of violent and wicked acts ? There are little ones who are given to their sordid homes for a very short time, who stand on the threshold of life in their pure white innocence, flitting here and there in happiness, all unconscious of the sin and evil around

them, visible emblems of purity, of love, of joy,—and in their presence who could be unconscious of their sweet influence?

“Happy those early days, when I
Shone in mine angel infancy !
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy ought
But a white, celestial thought ;
While yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love ;
And looking back at that short space,
Could catch a glimpse of His bright face.”

And so it was with little Teddy ; and bad as he was, old Spring was compelled to feel his sweet influence, in a way that nothing else in the world had ever moved him.

Poor Becca ! she went about her daily work with her heart very sore, though very uncomplaining. Jack had never come near her any more. It was with difficulty she kept the children from seeing things they should not. Teddy was often with his grandfather out of doors, much more than she thought desirable ; but how could she stop it, when the old man called him ? “ Teddy will catch a sad cold, father, if you take him out among the wet turnips, and in the snow and cold wind.”

But Spring would not attend to what she said.

"It will make Teddy hardy;"—and then of course he caught cold, and Becca had to nurse him well.

One day Teddy came dragging along something in his little pinafore, and reached Aunt Becca in the garden, breathless with eagerness.

"Why Teddy, what have you got there?"

"Something Granddaddy gave me to carry home."

"Let's look, then."

"Here Aunt Becca!" *he* said, 'it's a naughty pussey that Mr. John shot,' *but I say, it looks like a poor little bunny!*"

"Give it me," said Becca shortly, taking a hare from him, "he shouldn't tell you that." Then checking herself she said, "run away and play with Eddy now."

She was very much vexed, and perplexed what to do; one thing however she determined, and that was, "I must send them to school, before they get into bad ways. I'll ask Miss Alma if she will take them at Ivyton, as that is the nighest."

Accordingly the next time "the young lady" came, Becca made her request. Alma was delighted, but she must ask Mr. Erle first." Perhaps he would come and speak himself."

Old Spring, who was standing by at the time, laughed a mischievous chuckle, and said, "We don't want no parsons here, besides we belong to

Nested parish. Shall I tell you, little miss, what they did to the parson last place I was at?"

"Oh! Father," said Becca in a shocked voice.

"They told un if he'd go a poking his nose in the cupboard, they'd shut it in."

"Then they were very rude uncivil people, and they must have had something in the cupboard they were ashamed of his seeing," said Alma with flashing eyes.

"I'm sorry Father should tell you that story, miss," said Becca after the old man was gone out; "but I believe they made friends with the parson after a time. And perhaps some time Father may think differently too. I'm sure I should like to see a kind gentleman here, as they all say Mr. Erle is."

"I'll ask him Becca, and I've no doubt he'll come."

She did not know the difficulties, for "the Old Boat" was certainly not in Ivyton parish. Becca however for once carried her point with her father about the children; and although on the dark winter days it was too long a way across the downs, yet when the spring came they were allowed to go to Ivyton School. Annette Wray and Alma looked after them a great deal, and helped to keep up their nice training. Teddy was a

very tractable child and learnt quickly, and when he repeated his lessons and little hymns, sitting on the elbow of Grandfather's chair, old Spring would admire and praise him, saying, "He be a sharp un, he be!" till Becca felt afraid he ran some risk of being made conceited. However "Grandmother," as she was called, was quite alarming enough to prevent this from being the case. Teddy would not however be satisfied till Granddaddy would repeat the words with him, which he sometimes did to please the child; perhaps, too, he might be learning a little of something that went deeper than words.

CHAPTER XI.

A FAST FRIEND.

"THERE'S a friend of mine staying at Foxleigh," said John one morning, "so I asked him to walk over here to see me."

Alma looked at him in astonishment; the announcement was made so coolly at the breakfast table, and without any reference to the master or mistress of the house.

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Erle, "perhaps you would like to ask him to luncheon."

"Thank you; yes, I should," said John.

"I hope he's not one of your *fast* friends," said Alma in a low voice.

"Fast! what on earth do you mean? he's uncommonly slow, and as steady as old Time, only Time is much faster than he is. But Lyon's a good sort of fellow for all that."

"He must be very unlike some of them, from what you have said," remarked Alma.

John put on an injured and indignant air, saying, "Well, really Alma, I don't know why you should say so."

"Is that young Lyon of whom you are speaking? I know something of his uncle, and should like to see him," said the vicar.

Henry Lyon appeared some time before the early dinner, and was shown into the little parlour where Mrs. Erle and Alma were sitting. He looked very shy, and made an apology for having come too early, but the uncle with whom he was staying had told him the walk to Ivyton was six miles, so in these short days he thought he would make the most of his time; by short cuts however, he found it only half the distance.

"I hope you enjoyed your walk," said Aunt Letty.

"Oh yes, thank you; it is quite a treat to me, for I don't know this country at all, and its so pretty on the top of the downs."

"You don't live near here, then."

"No, I live with my mother, near Southampton; but sometimes I come here to visit my uncle."

"Do you like being at Dr. Berry's?" asked Alma.

"Not much," said the youth, and then he coloured from shyness, as Alma spoke to him.

"Indeed! how is that?" remarked Aunt Letty, "John Sherbrook seems to like it very much."

"Does he?—but of course one must be *some-where* to do one's work, so perhaps it doesn't so much matter."

When Uncle Matthew came in he received young Lyon very kindly, and began to ask after his uncle, with whom he had a slight acquaintance. His courteous, pleasant manner, soon put the youth at his ease, and in the next half hour there was more conversation between the two than had passed between the Vicar and John since the latter arrived at Ivyton. At length he said in a very kind tone, "Then I suppose you did not pass any more than John, as you are also going back to Dr. Berry's."

"Pass! not he!" broke in John, with a derisive laugh."

Henry Lyon blushed, and then said quietly, "No, I did not pass, but then I hardly expected it this time."

"Why was that?" asked Mr. Erle.

"Because I am afraid I became aware I was such a dunce," said Henry Lyon, with a laugh,—not carelessly, but very modestly.

"Well, that can be remedied I suppose, so I hope you may get through next time."

"Oh! everybody does then," said John.

"Not *everybody*, and I am very much afraid I shall not."

"And what are you going to do in that case?" asked Alma.

"I'm sure I don't know, but I must work for my living somehow."

"Oh! something will be sure to turn up," said John carelessly.

"Not without your looking for it pretty sharp though," said Lyon.

How different he was to John even Alma was obliged to admit; so respectful and attentive to Mr. and Mrs. Erle, so pleasant in his manner to herself, so unassuming, yet quietly firm towards John, he gave every one the feeling of having come from an atmosphere of all that was upright and honourable, combined with unusual sweetness and purity. The expression of that open brow spoke of a mind that rejected at once whatever was false or mean. When he left the room, Mr. Erle remarked to his wife, "Now that lad gives me the notion that he has been very well brought up. I am glad John should have so promising a friend; such companionship ought to be the best thing possible for him."

"Come out Lyon, and I'll show you a little fun," said John. But Alma called him back, and told

him in a few words the substance of old Molly's warning. John was vexed, but he laughed, and then said shortly, "Oh! we'll do no harm."

Lyon was not slow to perceive that something was amiss; but Alma did not feel very easy in mind as she saw the two walk away towards the village.

In the course of the afternoon she met them returning, and her first remark was "Oh! then, you didn't take your gun. I'm so glad."

"That'll do; shut up!" said John in an annoyed tone; "this priggish, puritanical fellow wouldn't let me, and he has been preaching me a sermon about it all the time."

Lyon laughed good naturedly. "I only said I wouldn't have anything to do with him, as he allowed he got his gun and took it out by stealth. That's not what I call a gentleman. Why not ask for it openly? So we took a long stretch down to the sea instead, and had a chat with an old fellow there, who wished we were young chaps in the Queen's Navy. I half think he was right."

"But you are too old now, I'm afraid."

"Yes; of course that increases the difficulties of choosing, when one has to make up one's mind so early."

"By the bye, Lyon," said John, absently, "I want you to lend me some money."

"What can you want with money here? besides I've not any to spare."

"Oh! I want it sometimes, and they are such screws here, I don't like asking for any."

"Oh don't! Johnny,"—began Alma, and then she stopped.

"I wonder how ever you can spend it here," said Lyon, "it does not look like a place to make one extravagant."

"I owe some, that's the long and short of it, and I must pay it before I go away."

Lyon took out his purse and looked at it; Alma watched him unconsciously, he had no seal ring on his finger like John, and all his clothes were very plain. After considering, he said, "Well, I suppose I can lend you half a sovereign. I *must* keep the rest to get back to Southampton."

"Thank you," said John, and presently left them as they were entering the Vicarage gate.

Alma lingered, looking after him, and then remarked "I am afraid John is very extravagant at Dr. Berry's.

"That he certainly is; but he never went on so badly in this way before, when he was at school."

"Were you at school with him? I didn't know that."

"Oh yes! He was always very good-natured to

me, and sometimes, when I, being a little fellow, was horribly bullied, he would take my part. He once fought a battle for me with the biggest fellow in school."

"Was that when he came home with a dreadful black eye, of which he was very proud?" asked Alma.

"No doubt," he said, laughing, "and a great row was made about it, but I was very much obliged to him, for I was let alone more after that. I don't know quite how it is, but the life at Berry's is doing him no good; there are some very bad fellows there."

Alma half shyly asked a question, often in her mind,—“But how does he spend his money? he never seems to have any.”

“You should rather say,—“What does he not spend it upon? Anything he sees,—anything that takes his fancy,—whether he wants it or not; and so his money runs away, and that is why he never has any.”

“Oh dear! what a pity,” cried Alma. “Can't you try Mr. Lyon and persuade him to be less extravagant?”

“I'm afraid I haven't much chance, if nobody here can do it.”

“Oh! but Uncle Matthew often talks to him

about it, and John always seems to attend, and then he forgets all about it."

"He's no business to forget," said Lyon, "I'm sure if the money matters to him as it does to me, he can't forget."

"Oh! but it does matter very much to him, for he cannot properly afford it; between his spending so much, and not working, we don't know what will happen to him."

"I'm *very* sorry," he said, in a sympathizing tone," but I'm afraid he won't attend to me. However I'll try what I can do." And he repeated this again to Alma when he went away; though he did not say how often he had vainly attempted to check John's extravagance, dragging him from one shop window after another where there was anything tempting to be bought, and doing all he possibly could to stop his betting and gambling.

John could not have had a truer friend, yet his advice had so far wrought nothing; for John still idled about with his gun, always keeping out of Mr. Erle's way, but not caring much otherwise where he went; some days going with Dick Bates, or else entirely alone. Of course, as old Molly said, the keepers heard of it, and one day they warned him, and turned him out of a wood, where he vainly protested he was only taking a walk. Bates in the meantime had disappeared.

“ Why did Uncle Matthew look so grave the next morning ? ” thought Alma. He might well do so. Sir Richard Treherne had returned from abroad in a hurry, and sent his head keeper with a polite note, stating that he understood that Mr. John Sherbrook had been shooting over his ground, and requesting that the vicar would bring over the young gentleman to speak to him at once.

John thought he had never had so unpleasant a drive as that in the back seat of the dog cart to Hurst Manor. He seriously meditated jumping off, if he could have seen where to make for. “ Really, what a fool he had been ! ”

He was obliged to admit to Mr. Erle that he had borrowed a gun from “ an old clod ; ” that he had been about a good deal amusing himself, and never doing any harm ; but though he tried to carry this off by a very insolent manner, he was secretly very uncomfortable, especially when Mr. Erle remarked that his conduct no doubt must have been a great assistance to the poachers, with whom most gentlemen would hardly care to associate. And what had he gained by it all, beyond disgracing himself ? When Sir Richard Treherne asked him if he could say anything about the facts which his keeper had reported to him, John Sherbrook blundered through an awkward apology, quite in-

sufficient, and not altogether sincere. Sir Richard however was willing to accept this, although at the same time he hinted that there was such a thing as a warrant for trespass in search of game, in case this should occur again !

Here the Vicar interposed, " Excuse me, Sir Richard ! Mr. John Sherbrook will not trouble you again I am sure, if he has the feelings of a gentleman."

Mr. Erle had in his mind determined that John should leave Ivyton in the course of the next day. Poor Alma thought it very hard, and cried bitterly in secret over her brother's going away.

" It's not a week I lose," said John, " and I'll never set foot in the place again ! "

He looked very sullen as Mr. Erle talked to him about his conduct very seriously ; but he cared more in reality for a few words that Henry Lyon had said to him three days before, expressing his entire disapproval of John's ways.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PARSON IN PERPLEXITY.

THREE months had passed away, and no one was in exactly the same state. The Vicar of Ivyton had been sorely vexed and troubled by all that he found out. Of course as soon as John Sherbrook had left the place, the whole story came out with additions, in which it was impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood. He was obliged to submit to the unsatisfactory feeling of having sheltered in his own house one who had done his utmost to destroy much of the fruits of his work during twenty years. Of course those were not wanting who insinuated "that the parson knew well enough all Mr. John was doing, only there was a difference when you came to poor folks." But the respectable cottagers were all "sorry the young gentleman had done so bad by the parson, and been so sly." John left no good character behind him, and the young Wrays were furious against him. "Father

would never allow *us* to carry a gun everywhere without leave," said Dick. "Yes, I wish we had come across young Sherbrook," said Bob, "we would have thrashed him well!" (They were both younger and shorter than John.) Annette did her best to put a stop to such talk, but even she was aware of rather an uncomfortable feeling between Alma and herself; still she hoped that would pass away in time.

There was no doubt that the parson was obliged to confess to himself that he was very much disappointed in "young Mr. John." Though he had repeatedly said he did not expect much, he had thought to find in Alma's brother a character of a different order, not of one so utterly idle and reckless. He would rather have avoided knowing John, but as things now were he would not fail in endeavours to draw out a little good, or to start the youth with better purposes in life. Perhaps he might do better in a second visit to Ivyton. The kind man therefore wrote him many friendly letters, enquiring after his work and progress, and adding any information about Alma that was likely to interest him; but these letters were all unnoticed by John.

Mr. Erle was one of those men who always take great pleasure in the company of young people;

he liked watching their mental growth, he took an interest in their thoughts and feelings and pursuits. He was fond of the children in his school, and knew them all intimately. The love for the society of young people sometimes grows still stronger in the decline of life, and the girl who had now been an inmate of Ivyton Vicarage for nearly a year, had become a great delight to him. He had continued her education, and cultivated a mind that seemed quite ready to answer to his careful tending; he was learning to know a young heart that grew more dear to him daily. Surely Alma would never disappoint him !

He had always had an intense longing for a daughter in his own home; the idea of a young child to develop under his careful training, the sweet companionship, the tender intertwining of the joy and brightness of youth to cheer and support the years of declining age, would have made his home to him an ideal of perfect happiness. When the project of taking Alma into his own house first occurred to him, it seemed to meet a want which he had sometimes almost unconsciously recognized. " Letty is not fond of books, she only tolerates them for my sake ;"—and this he had often unwillingly been forced to acknowledge to himself. But a young girl whom he could culti-

vate mentally as he wished, who could appreciate and combine with his literary tastes, would be a new interest which he had been obliged to forego for the last thirty years. So from the first he had set out on the plan of receiving the orphan girl as if she actually belonged to his own family ; entering into her interests, and as much as possible into her thoughts and feelings ; sympathizing with her troubles, and expecting a response on her side. He hoped he should be wise with her ; he knew she was already very precious to him, and trusted that their mutual relation might only increase in value ; but he could not be without his anxieties. If however they could but receive her into their family as a new and precious gift from God, as a fresh blessing both now and in the future, how willingly would he meet the additional anxieties, the unknown responsibilities which this charge must involve. But there was of course an uncertainty in the experiment, the thought of which he could not hide from himself. At present his mind was not quite at ease ; he did not know whether Alma was at all to blame with regard to John's doings ; something she evidently knew on the subject, but how much he did not care to enquire.

With Aunt Letty however the case was different. Ivyton and its surroundings contained all her in-

terests, where her life had been wholly made up in that of her husband ; she admired his intellectual tastes without sharing them, and wrapped up in her admiration for him, she had never felt the same want. She had begun to like Alma better by degrees ; she had grown more used to her, and that was all.

John, with his fun and spirits, had at first carried her away, and she was now vexed and disappointed with him, and felt really sorry for Alma when he left Ivyton in disgrace.

Poor girl ! she was very unhappy ; the cherished remembrance of her brother had been rudely swept away, and in secret she was obliged to confess that he was very far removed from her ideal picture ; that her hero was capable of doing very mean and bad things. She tried to persuade herself that he was harshly treated, that nobody understood him ; though she felt keenly his meanness and his extravagant ways. But she kept these feelings to herself, and their result was a state of want of confidence between her and her kind friends that was very hurtful.

There is many a John Sherbrook in all classes. He had no principle, no stability, no steady purpose, but was just ready to drift about with every wave of a fancy that floated past him. Yet he

could be obstinate enough when it was possible to gratify his own will. His rich relation, Lady Anstey, had done her best to spoil him ; she admired his handsome looks, his ready fun and non-sense ; she had brought him forward, and fostered his self-conceit and extravagant habits to the utmost of her power. John felt himself a very important person ; he well knew he had cleverness enough to have passed the examinations if he would ever have worked, but idleness was very agreeable to him, and having no interest in books he did not care to exert himself, and hated the idea of knowledge crammed into him ; while he threw away the chance of entering the profession to which it opened the way.

He had no thought of being morally responsible for himself, all that was forgotten ; and still more had John Sherbrook put away the idea of being answerable to any Superior Being, to an Almighty Father, for the way in which he was wasting the advantages of youth and strength, health and happiness, his position in life, and his influence on those around him. There were many others like him he knew, and what did it matter ? Yet he was doing his utmost to make himself utterly worthless, and to throw himself away.

And is this the result of our much boasted edu-

cation of the present time? Is this the way in which we expect to bring up young men fit to meet the difficulties and problems contained in the years to come? Often combined with much self-indulgence and extravagance,—a system of acquiring a surface knowledge, with nothing solid for a foundation, where every subject is of value simply by the number of marks it will make, where rapidity and overstrained hours of work carry everything before them,—is this the way to help our youth to grow up into real men, with courage and moral strength,—men working with humility and earnestness to do their duty before God, and in the sight of all the world?

The strong and the first-rate may stand the test, but for the average turn of mind the trial is so severe that it surely were best avoided.

CHAPTER XIII.

ACCOUNT BOOKS TELL TALES.

AUNT LETTY was poring over some account books, and to-day she was in rather a fuss. She always paid the village grocer's bill quarterly, and she was very particular in trying to make her expenditure come to a regular average. She was quite right ; she did not want " to be too close in anything, but at the same time they could not afford any extras." She was always punctual in her payments, and her memory in such things was an accurate one. To-day, however, she was fairly puzzled. After adding up the columns of indistinct-looking figures again and again, she always came back to the same result, which was, to find that the bill was far larger than usual. At length, laying down the paper with a perplexed look, and turning round rather quickly, she called " Alma ! will you come here." Alma rose. " What is it, Aunt Letty ? "

" Can you remember if we had anything extra from Colter's in January ? "

Alma hesitated, and Mr. Erle remarked, "My dear, don't you remember there was John with us; that may make some difference in your calculations."

"Oh yes, I've taken all that into account," said she, hastily; but even then there is a large amount over, at least more than a pound. You look over the bill with me, Alma; I cannot make it out;—here it comes one day after another,—I am sure it must be a mistake, for I never ordered it in. See here it comes, *Sugar, Sugar!* day after day, and no preserving goes on in January, you know."

Alma stood silent; at length she said in a constrained tone, "But is it Sugar?"

"Why what else could it be, what do you make of it?"

The writing was bad, but Alma read it differently; at length she said, colouring very much, "Isn't it '*Cigars*'?"

Cigars! how should it be Cigars? Neither your uncle nor I smoke them I'm sure.

Alma felt obliged to say she knew John had had some, and perhaps they had put them down in the books by mistake.

Aunt Letty looked at her keenly over her spectacles, remarking, "I'm sorry Alma, if John smokes so much. But did he pay for them?"

"I believe,"—then Alma stopped herself doubtfully, "I can't be sure, I don't know." She felt obliged to acknowledge to herself it was not his habit to pay.

"Hand me the book, my dear," broke in Mr. Erle. "Colter is an honest man I know; I'll ask him all about it when next I go out; he will tell me how the matter stands."

Alma felt the remark rather keenly; it implied to her a doubt in John's honesty, which after all was not undeserved.

Mr. Colter in his little village shop of grocery, drapery, hardware, and mixed goods, explained the matter at once. "Certainly Mr. John had ordered the cigars, and also various other things, such as powder and shot, and when he took them he promised to pay day after day, but he never did. So they had been put down in the account." When Mr. Erle returned, he laid down before Alma a bill of the various things, saying, "Now I have paid this that Colter may not be a loser, but I wish to have it sent to John for him to repay. Stay,"—he said, considering, "I had better perhaps send it to him myself."

He wrote a very kind letter to John, pointing out the danger of leaving even small debts to accumulate and be forgotten, and warning him against

extravagant and self-indulgent habits, which were wrong in themselves, and at the same time he could by no means afford. It was long before an answer came; at length, when Alma had made one or two vain applications for repayment, a post office order came from John, saying he had had no money before, and implying that the shop at Ivyton had cheated him. The handsome seal ring had been sold, at a quarter of its real value, to pay the amount of this bill. Nor was this the only instance, for various small debts were soon discovered, which the Vicar kindly paid first hand, as he did not want his poor people to suffer, trusting to John's honour to repay him in time.

Aunt Letty was greatly vexed; she "did not think that John would have acted so unlike a gentleman;" she was sorry also for the disappointment to her husband, and to Alma, as well as to herself.

Alma was really very unhappy, from many reasons. There came a dark time with her. It was as if the sand-storms had swept over her life, destroying her ideal of Ivyton, of her kind friends, of everything connected with the place. John's misconduct had given a gloomy shadow to everything. And yet she would not allow to herself it was his fault. She was reserved and distant with

her kind friends; even Annette did not appear to soothe her as usual.

Lydia Wray was to leave home after Easter, as her father said he was tired of seeing her at home doing nothing. Mr. and Mrs. Wray had not been as wise with Lydia as with Annette. They had always spoilt her, and let her have her own way in everything. She had been sent to a "Superior Ladies' School," where she had received a very flimsy education, had learnt a little smattering of French, and picked up a little surface knowledge. The only thing she liked, was to sing with a naturally pretty voice, and to rattle off a few pieces on the piano, in a very indifferent fashion. As for thought or mind, she had none.

Still Lydia was very amusing and lively when she liked, and Alma knew she should miss her company a good deal. They walked together often, and sometimes made an exchange of amusing books. But the intercourse was not improving to Alma.

And what were Lydia's books like? They consisted of a number of cheap novels, which she had picked up at the railway station, when she drove with her father to the nearest town. Many of them were simply of an entirely silly and worthless character; but there were others, which Lydia

found the most interesting, and described the stories as "*most delightfully naughty.*" Such was the light-minded and frivolous way in which she spoke of the books which to her and to innumerable other young persons were so attractive.

The object of these tales appeared to Lydia to be the representation of life in its most interesting shape ; a number of delightful young men and women, wrought up to the height of bliss, or plunged into the depths of despair, formed the principal characters ; with whom love and hatred, passion and impulse, ruled supreme. It was nothing to Lydia that all moral and religious principle were utterly wanting ; that sins against the Divine law were glossed over as small offences,—often made out to be excusable and necessary under the pressure of circumstances. Intricate plots, conflicting affections, were represented as making every expedient, every subterfuge, allowable and necessary.

With such unwholesome reading as her chief mental food, was it wonderful that Lydia Wray's character should be of but a very low type ; that her whole mind and principles should become more and more debased, and her perceptions of right and wrong more and more blunted. But alas ! there are only too many who read like Lydia Wray.

And Alma read some also. First to please Lydia, and then to amuse herself. The interest and excitement and glitter of the stories, took her by storm, and carried her on when she would otherwise have stopped; and with a young girl of very sensitive feelings the effect would have been even more lasting and harmful. Scenes and characters stamped themselves on her imagination; stories haunted her at most unfitting seasons; complicated feelings perplexed her with their oppositions and contradictions, and entirely absorbed her in the midst of her duties. She grew more insatiable for the books, and yet they destroyed her peace. Had Alma been really intimate with a woman of superior mind, who was in the same relation to her as Aunt Letty, such a state of things would have been impossible; but between these two there was little intimacy of any kind, and no interchange of ideas about books.

CHAPTER XIV.

HURST MANOR.

“WILL you be ready by two o’clock Alma? for Carter’s fly is coming up then, and I don’t want to keep it waiting.”

“What for, Aunt Letty?” asked Alma in some surprise; for Aunt Letty did not often go to the expense of a drive.

“I want to drive to Hurst Manor, to call on Miss Treherne, and as it takes a long time——”

“Oh! but I was going to Annette,” broke in Alma hastily.

“My dear, Annette can wait, so put on a nicer dress, and be ready in time.”

Alma made various excuses; she was very busy with this and that, she did not want to spend the time,—the real thing was, she did not wish to go.

But Uncle Matthew’s desire carried the point, and with a very bad grace she set off, only mentally hoping she should not see “those rich, proud people, who were so hard upon poor John.”

Hurst Manor was rather an old-fashioned place, with its spreading woods and long slopes of waving grass close around it, rich with the beauty of May; the hawthorn trees in full, soft, snowy blossom, the oaks with their yellow tinted leaves still not fully out, the firs sweeping away towards the windy down, fringed at the base with gorse and under-wood, and in the distance the stripe of pale blue sea. The views among the downs are so full of variety, that each turn and slope of hill has its fresh charm and beauty; and Alma felt as if she had opened upon a fresh and new picture of an English home among the downs.

In a large room, where the glare of the midday sun was shaded at one end by a verandah covered with clematis and jessamine, they awaited Miss Treherne, who was out in the garden. Alma had time to look round and notice the comfort and good taste of the furniture, and to be yet more attracted by some beautiful paintings which adorned the walls. She stood for some minutes before a small, but beautiful landscape, so absorbed in admiration, that she had not been aware of the approach of another person, until a very sweet and kind voice remarked beside her, "You think that is very pretty, don't you? I am so pleased to see you here to-day,"—and then she put out her hand

very pleasantly and cordially. She went on talking about the pictures, telling Alma about their subjects and the places where they had been bought, and little interesting facts about them.

And this was the proud lady whom Alma had so much desired to avoid! and yet before she had fully looked at the face, she felt strangely attracted by a refined graciousness of manner, and found herself drawn into a conversation which she would have been much too shy to carry on while conscious of her own feelings.

After some little time spent in this way, Miss Treherne turned to Mrs. Erle, saying, "I think you would like to see the garden, we have some pretty things out now."

"Oh yes, by all means," said Aunt Letty, "your garden is always a show."

After standing about some time among the brilliant flower beds that adorned a south eastern slope, Aunt Letty began to find the air rather chilly, and remarked, "I really think I must have a shawl, I believe I left one on the hall table."

"Let me fetch it, Aunt Letty," said Alma starting off.

"Then we will go on to the conservatory," said Miss Treherne, "it will be warmer there. What a nice bright looking girl that is," she remarked, looking after Alma.

"Yes,—well,—she looks rather dull sometimes, but I suppose young people do find themselves rather dull with old ones."

"Oh! I don't think that is necessary at all; I know I was never dull with my grandfather when I was a girl; and it must surely be pleasant to have a nice lively young companion with you."

"My husband makes quite a companion of her, and he takes endless pains with her. I tell him he spoils her," said Aunt Letty evasively.

"I'm sure I hope she will repay his trouble in time; and she cannot possibly be dull with him. How does the brother go on?"

"Well, he says he is working, but young men are so disappointing you know, my dear."

"All the more do I hope this young lady will not disappoint you; I had hoped her living with you might be a great interest to you."

Aunt Letty gave a little cough; she could not give a hearty assent, but presently remarked, "People think so, and my husband says so,—but to tell the truth, my dear, we have lived a good many years very happily without her, and I think we should do just as well now. Besides, my dear, you know it costs a good deal."

Ah Aunt Letty! how little you thought of the effect of that speech, or that the one of whom you

were speaking had unintentionally heard most of it. Alma had returned sooner than was expected, but she turned back to be out of the way of hearing more, and now with crimsoned cheeks and a few proud tears, she was bending over a curious plant at the other end of the conservatory to recover her composure. Miss Treherne perceived her after a few moments, and went back to bring her on and to take the shawl. She saw at a glance that something was amiss with the girl, and strove with considerate kindness to soothe her; for the idea had suddenly occurred to her, that it certainly would be very uncomfortable if Alma had heard that speech. But it was of little avail showing off beautiful geraniums or creepers or gloxinias, or variegated leaves, for Alma was silent and reserved during the rest of the visit; she felt angry and hurt with Aunt Letty, and was quite relieved when Miss Treherne accompanied them for a short distance on the returning drive.

As for Aunt Letty, she chatted away very cheerfully about their pleasant visit, quite unconscious of the wound she had given. (Alma appeared meanwhile intently engaged in tying up a bunch of beautiful flowers.) If any one had asked Mrs. Erle, she would have said she meant to be very kind to Alma, and that with a certain

amount of truth ; but she had never gone out of her way to try and understand her, or given up any of her own favourite pursuits in order to cultivate the tastes congenial to a young girl. So the time had gone on without there being any leisure or inclination for any sympathy between the two, and instead there were many little jars and worries, which only made them drift still farther apart.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PARSON CATECHIZING.

AUNT LETTY was very busily engaged in smoothing out carefully some breadths of black silk, and then holding them up for minute inspection near the window, when her husband entered the room. He threw himself down on the sofa, as if tired, remarking, "Pray what is my wife doing?"

"Your wife is looking at her old gown, and thinking of asking you for a new one."

"Do you want one so much?"

"Well, I do my dear; look here! its all worn out;" said she, holding up a breadth to the light, and pointing out a number of tiny holes.

"Can't they be mended?" said he.

"Mended! just like a man to say that. Why the silk is all cut through. Fancy mending all those little pin holes."

"Well, and what then?" said he shortly.

"Then I suppose I mustn't say anything more

about it at present. What has tired you so, Matthew ? ”

“ Only a long walk. ” Then picking up one of the breadths of silk, he remarked, “ I am afraid we must be sparing this year, from what I heard just now. ”

“ What was that ? ”

“ We shall have no dividend this year, for the Saxborough bank has stopped payment, and is supposed to be broken. ”

“ Who told you that, my dear ? ”

“ Mr. Wray ; he is involved in it also, and of course that matters to him, with his large family, more than to us. But I’m afraid it’s true. ”

“ Then all our little property would be lost. Oh ! Matthew, that’s a bad hearing. Never mind about the dress dear, ” said she cheerfully, “ there’s no use fretting for that ; I’ll make it do. ”

“ I wish other things were as easily mended, ” said he, “ but if we lose all now we are getting old, it is a serious matter. ”

“ There’s the living, it makes no difference to that. ”

“ We shall not like to give less away, or do less in the parish ; and it will be a difficult matter to make both ends meet, I know. ”

“ Well, don’t look so grave about it beforehand,

dear Matthew ; it may come all right you know in time." She went on quite cheerfully " trying to hearten him up," as she called it ; but finding she could not as usual succeed, at length remarked, " It's not like you to be so downcast, don't pray be so over-anxious."

" That's not all," he said, after a long pause, and added in a grave voice, " but Letty, I've met with a bitter disappointment."

" My dear Matthew ! you frighten me. What can you mean ? "

" I'm more disappointed than I can tell. Alma says she does not wish to live with us ; " and his voice shook a little.

" Indeed ! " said Mrs. Erle, in a surprised tone, " What makes her say that ? "

" That I cannot make out,—I cannot get her to explain."

" Well ! *I am* surprised, after all we have done for her, after all the pains you have taken with her,—all the additional expense. She cannot know when she is well off."

" Perhaps not," said he sadly, " but you cannot make people like and dislike as you wish."

" Then how have you settled about it ? What will she do ? "

" I have settled nothing positively ; but I told

her I wished her to remain with us at least till we could see our way about John. She is so young—”

“ Well ! I really wish Alma was a little more grateful.”

“ Grateful ! ah ! Letty, that is not the word. I should have liked her to feel an affection that would make her wish to stay with us as a matter of course.”

“ Well ! I do call it ungrateful.”

“ No Letty ; you wouldn’t have thought her ungrateful if you had seen her. Poor child ! she cried ; but she doesn’t know the world, when she expects to meet with more happiness than I should have done my best to give her. I am afraid there must be some fault in ourselves if we cannot make her happy.”

“ You can’t make people happy if they won’t be so, but it is disappointing.”

He said no more then, but the question would recur to him again and again, “ Why could not they make her happy ? ” In the midst of his books, in his solitary walks, in his parish visiting, his true and tender heart was undergoing many a deep self-questioning, as to how he might have failed, both in his duty and his desire. He watched the village labourer take his child on his knee, and caress it with real affection, and yet this was a man

who was not always sober or honest; the carter spoke roughly and sternly to his daughter, yet she thoughtfully and dutifully attended to his wants; he saw the village mother bending over her boy, to give him directions for a distant errand, yet she had the character of being a scold. Their homes were often not such as he could wish, yet they were all rejoicing in that source of happiness which was wanting in his own. Was he wrong to try to remedy that want? Had it all been a mistake, and had he been unwise in taking the girl into his own family? Was it a selfish wish that made him long for the comfort and sweetness of a daughter's affection? Why was it that this sweet flower, when transplanted into his own garden, tended and sheltered with care, would not take root and blossom richly in the sunshine? In what ways had he failed, that she did not respond to the care and kindness they had shown her?

To be sure, Letty had once said that it seemed fighting against God's will to try and make the child their own, when they had none; but against this his heart spoke out plainly, "no, not so!" Would it have been better to have left her young and still unformed as she was, to begin a fight for her own maintenance among strangers? When she had been placed in his hands on the death of her

grandfather, was he to make the responsibility of a guardian the most meagre, the most narrow of duties?

He had not discovered the want of sympathy in his wife which was the real cause of their failure; he knew she had been averse to Alma's coming at first, but she had acceded to his wish, and he thought there was a good understanding between them. She had also shown much kindness to John, who certainly had done little to deserve it.

With these and many other perplexing thoughts in his mind, did the old parson of Ivyton carry on his self-questionings, day after day, always coming back to the same result,—“I cannot let her go, we must win her back to us by yet more love.”

And so Whitsuntide drew on, with all its summer beauty; and on Whitsunday the old clergyman spoke to the village of that Spirit of wisdom and power, of purity, of peace and love. “How much,” he reminded them, “do we all need it in even this little quiet place, to give us a right judgment in all things. How much do we all need to pray for it in our homes, in our lives, to fill them with love, joy, peace, and its beautiful fruits. How much too shall we all need that Spirit in the hour of death, when though all things else fail, yet may

we pass safely through the final darkness, if we can rest on and rejoice in that Holy comfort."

And was there peace in Alma's heart? Alas! no. In a state of perpetual unrest, and full of real trouble about John, she fretted against her lot; she suffered her mind to dwell only on its deficiencies, and forgot its compensations, while fancied causes of discontent grew in importance. All the unwholesome books she had read had produced their certain effect; her feelings and nerves were wrought up to a most unnatural pitch, she could feel no interest in the usual course of life, all the little jars with Aunt Letty were magnified, and she only met them with irritability and low spirits. Such feelings were not likely to make her happy during the months to which she looked forward.

But she had at heart a consciousness that she had not acted rightly to her kind friend; she could not bear to look in his face, from which she felt so much light and pleasure had faded.

Yet he treated her with such untiring patience and affection, making large allowance for her difficulties, for her inexperience, and above all for her constant anxiety about John.

"You were up very late last night Alma, your candle was not out when I went downstairs to

make sure the kitchen door was locked, for Nancy forgot it once."

"I was rather late."

"My dear, you are often very late, and it makes you burn a great many candles."

"Besides it's not at all good for you to sit up so late, you look quite tired out in the morning;" remarked Uncle Matthew.

"But why should you sit up?" asked Aunt Letty rather provokingly, "I cannot see that you have any call to do it."

"I cannot always sleep when I go to bed," murmured Alma.

Mr. Erle looked at her very keenly, but yet very kindly.

"My dear, sitting up late is a very bad receipt for sleep."

So Alma knew; she had sat up many nights, and the hours spent in reading some highly exciting tale had helped to destroy her sleep.

"Here's a letter for you Alma," said Aunt Letty, it looks like one from Lydia. She seems to write to you very often, you had another two days ago. What has she got to say?"

"She always wants me to write much oftener than I can," said Alma.

"Then I certainly would not attempt to do so,"

said Uncle Matthew, "or even encourage her to write, for though I never saw one of Lydia's letters, I cannot think they are worth much."

He would have thought so still less if he had seen the contents of the silly gossippy letters which Alma received so frequently, with Lydia's accounts of her flirtations and half engagements. They usually ended with an injunction, "don't show this to Annette, or I shall be scolded."

Lydia had been sent to Brighton, to stay with an invalid aunt, who could not look after her; she had now, entirely contrary to the express desire of her parents, made an engagement to sing in a small theatre in the town. She wrote to Alma, "Have you read that story I left with you? and then making an allusion to a very silly and wrong engagement, ended with, "that is the case with your friend Lydia."

After reading Lydia's letter in her own room, Alma had taken up the book to see the meaning of the allusion, when a knock at the door made her start; it was Uncle Matthew, saying he should like to take her to Hurst Manor, as he was driving there this morning.

But Alma felt she must now break through Lydia's reserve to Annette, so thanking him she said she had a very particular reason for wishing

to go to the Farm ; besides, she had too bad a headache to drive so far.

“ I’m sorry, for I should have liked to take you with me. But I see you have a bad headache my dear, I hope it will be better before I come back. What are you reading there ? ”

He picked up the book, which she had inadvertently left beside her.

“ What is this ? ” said he, looking at the title. “ Surely you are not reading such rubbish as this ? do take something worth more. I didn’t even know it was in the house. Oh ! I suppose it is one of John’s books. Very wrong of him to give it you too ! ”

“ Oh no ! John never gave any of the books. ”

“ More sense than I thought ; but how *did* you get it ? ”

Alma was silent, and he went on, “ My dear child, I don’t suppose you know anything about it, but this book is one most unsuitable for a well brought up young person, and I do not wish you to read it. ” He took it in his hand, asking again, “ but do tell me how you got it. ”

Alma still made no reply, but coloured violently. There was a painful pause, when his eye caught a name written faintly in pencil on the outside. “ Then I suppose it was Lydia gave it you. Well,

don't apply to her for books again, she is no fitting guide. I cannot rule her, but if you were a child of my own, I should forbid your reading it,—so you must let me take it away now." He was in a hurry to be gone, and left the room, carrying the book with him.

CHAPTER XVI.

ABOUT BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

SIR RICHARD was not at home, but Miss Treherne received the Vicar, and begged him to stay for luncheon. "Shall I be welcome?" said he, "for I am come on rather an ungracious errand."

"Oh! it is so long since I have seen you, and I am so glad to have the opportunity of talking with you, for I have been so much engaged that I have not been over to Ivyton."

She then enquired after Mrs. Erle and Alma. "My wife is very well thank you, but I do not think Alma is." He then turned to other matters, saying, "I was coming to ask your father's help with a little money for setting up a library in Ivyton. I cannot afford it myself, as I am not so well off as I was; but as a good deal of his land and many of his labourers are in Ivyton parish, I thought I might ask for a little of his kind help."

"I am sure Papa will be very glad to give it; and I hope it means that your Ivyton people are

beginning to want books, which must be very encouraging to you. I know you once despaired of books being ever wished for."

"Of course the old people, who have never learned to read, do not feel the need of books; but when you have spent thirty or forty years in trying to educate the younger generation, it is by no means encouraging to find the kind of reading with which they are satisfied. For instance, I go into a labourer's cottage, and find a little boy who has been carefully taught to read, and has done well at school, conning over a newspaper; and I ask, 'well my boy, what are you reading in the paper?' 'Oh! sir, I'm reading to Father all the murders.' 'Anything else?' 'Yes; all the railway accidents.' Then I see another lad who has had a little more education, bending over what he is reading with such an absorbed air, and I ask the same question. 'Oh! such an interesting story, and such jolly pictures; look here, sir!' and he puts into my hand an illustrated paper, with some exciting story, in which the hero commits a few murders, and takes refuge in suicide; with pictures to match. So I feel, 'my lads, I am afraid you are not much the better for learning to read, if you have nothing of a higher style than this.'"

"Oh! but there are so many nice books suitable

for such boys," said Miss Treherne, "that I should like to spread amongst them."

"I should be very glad if you could tell me them; for they require a great deal of very careful choosing. Perhaps I am a little old-fashioned in my taste, for I certainly do not approve of a great many that are often given by very good people. There is often a great deal of religious sentimentality, and they are quite unreal."

"But you want to make your books attractive, as well as religious, for such young people; not too dry."

"I know what you would say to me," said he, with a smile; "Letty's favourite quotation, 'Milk for babes,'—but if there is milk, it is often diluted or mixed with so much sentimentality as to be very hurtful. I think such books are answerable for a great deal."

"In what way do you mean?" said she.

"I have often seen instances of what I mean. I dislike books where the highest subjects are brought down to the level of familiarity, and when some of the deepest mysteries in the Bible are dragged down for their comprehension. The child is brought up on such books of sentimental feeling, a religious tone is very much pressed in them, but there is little that can help him when he comes to

actual life and its duties. The boy is sent to school, to fight through all its difficulties and contradictions, and unless his religious training has been *real*, all his impressions are swept away, and then regarded as false. And then how I pity the poor child, and feel that we older people are to blame. I think we are often too self-indulgent to ourselves, even in the matter of training our children."

"But you would sympathize with them, and feel with them?"

"Most certainly, yes; rejoice with them, grieve with them, be a child with them; but help them by our training of them and of ourselves also, to grow up into what is desirable. I am sometimes inclined to think that older people forget that children ought to grow up into responsible beings."

Miss Treherne was silent for a few minutes, and then said, "After all, I am afraid the taste for inferior and bad books is not confined to readers in the lower classes, for I think people of education are very much in fault. Of course I speak chiefly of women; but whilst I have been abroad I have been struck by the careless way in which young girls are allowed to read books which parents ought rather to forbid. While their elders are quite ignorant of their contents, the excuse that the books are in a foreign language, and will improve

their knowledge of it, leads on many a girl to this careless reading. I used quite to feel ashamed for my young countrywomen, when I saw the worthless stuff they were studying, and see how carelessly the refined taste and delicacy of feeling, on which we used to pride ourselves as English people, was quite forgotten, or regarded only as a proof of narrowness of mind. And unfortunately such books are translated, and find their way into many an English home; where girls may pick them up in total ignorance, and the harm that is done is incalculable."

"Yes; that kind of reading is the cause of a great deal of the overstrained morbid state of feeling, the insatiable thirst for excitement, and the spirit of irreverence so common at the present day. I know I may be thought old fashioned; but your good mother did not bring you up on such unwholesome food."

"No indeed," said Miss Treherne, "I always remember how very early she pointed out to me a passage in 'Guy Mannerling,' which she said applied to sensational books."

He seemed rather absent, till presently Miss Treherne remarked, "It must I think be a great pleasure and interest to you to guide your young niece's taste in books, as well as in other things."

Mr. Erle started, and felt he must decide the question which had been in his own mind ever since he entered the hall of Hurst Manor. Should he consult Ella Treherne about his difficulties with Alma, or was it wiser to struggle through them alone?

He had known her well in her girlhood, in times of happiness, and also of trouble and trial; and though during some years spent mainly abroad, nursing a sick mother, he had seen but little of her lately, he felt the greatest confidence in her elevated and wide mind, her deeply religious character, and the generous lovingness of her heart. She, who had struggled through the losses of mother and brother, would surely help him with some counsel for his own little Alma; the little ewe lamb that he hoped to cherish in his own home, who had so bitterly disappointed him. So with much pain, yet with much tenderness, he told how in his own house, in such a little out-of-the-way place as Ivyton, the very same dangers were to be found, against which he desired to guard his young charge. Had he not found her that very day reading one of those novels of which he so highly disapproved? He entered besides fully into the story of his perplexities; he had hoped to have gained more influence over her in every way, he had treated

her with confidence, with affection, and had tried to make her like a daughter, and yet—yet when it came to the point, she did not wish to live with them.

Miss Treherne was pained that her old friend's kindness should have met with no better return, and asked if there was no reason in any way to account for Alma's decision, and also what would be the alternative?

"My dear young lady, I cannot understand it; unless I must suppose I am grown too old to be able to influence the young, or to enter into their feelings."

"Oh! that I am sure would not be the case," said she warmly.

"Well, I am sure I hope not; but when she knows that the alternative must be to earn her own living, and take her chance among strangers, I should have thought a home where she has been received with such affection as we can give, was not to be refused. She hardly knows enough to teach, and," he added rather mournfully, "it seems to me she has a great deal to learn, poor child."

"I wish I knew more of her," said Ella, "her look interested me. May I come and see her, and may I send her some more modern books than perhaps you have?"

He accepted the offer gratefully, and Miss Treherne also made out a list of many books which she thought would be interesting and suitable to Alma.

It was late before the old clergyman turned homewards; he felt very sad at heart with all he had been telling. It had been a relief to speak of his trouble to one who was wise and sympathizing, but yet he felt unusually depressed as he drove along. If Alma could but have been all he wished! And his thoughts did not remain in the present alone, but ranged back over many years. Did he think of the sweet young sister of his early days, with her refined taste and richly gifted mind, whose pure and elevated standard of character had exercised such an effect over highly cultivated men; whose lovely and blameless life ended only too early,—but who, when knowing that her steps were standing close to the Ocean of Death, with its unknown shores, would yet trust herself entirely to the love of the Eternal Father, without fear.

All so long ago, but as vivid and as dear to remembrance as if had been only yesterday.

* * * * *

And this poor child! whom he had longed to form on her model,—how was it with her? He

seemed utterly to have failed, and in that case the result would only be one of deep humiliation and of real sorrow.

He entered his house very silently, but he was not unheard, for his wife opened the sitting-room door, and exclaimed, "Oh my dear Matthew! so you are back at last. I've been wanting you so much."

"Why? Is anything the matter?"

"Oh dear yes! a great deal; those poor Wrays are in sad trouble, and I'm so flurried and upset."

"Then is Mrs. Wray ill again?"

"No; worse than that; but no doubt she will be made ill with such bad news. It quite gave me a turn, though I always expected something of the sort."

„But what is it Letty?" said he anxiously.

"You hadn't been gone half an hour before Annette came down, terribly upset, poor girl. They had just had a letter from her aunt, Mrs. Taylor, at Brighton, to say that Lydia had got married."

"Lydia married! What can you mean?"

"Just what I'm telling you. She had gone out that morning and got married to a young man belonging to a German band, and left a note to tell her aunt. They went off by train, no one knew where. Mr. Wray is gone off to Brighton."

"Does Alma know this? What did her letter say?" he asked in a very disturbed tone.

"Oh! her letter said nothing of being married; besides it was written three days ago, and only posted yesterday."

"Poor silly girl! how wretched for her parents! I must go and see Mrs. Wray directly. Where's Alma? What did she say? Isn't she very much shocked?" he asked hurriedly.

"Oh yes; she's crying upstairs, she is terribly distressed, and all the more so from what Annette said about Lydia's letter, something like that those wretched silly books she was so fond of, were at the bottom of all the mischief."

"Annette was right, I have no doubt," he said, but his face darkened as he thought he must question Alma further.

Who would have thought there was so much pain and trouble in the little village of Ivyton, as the Vicar walked back from Mr. Wray's farm that evening, where the rich wheat fields were beginning to turn yellow, and the sheep were slowly cropping their way towards the top of the down, and little Sam was driving the bullocks home to their yard, and in the distance the pale stripe of sea took a golden rosy hue from the setting sun. Such a pic-

ture of outward peace, and yet so much sorrow in the household he had been visiting ; for a daughter had cast herself adrift from all parental authority, and by her frivolity and wilfulness had chosen out a lot which could promise nothing but misery ; for what blessing could follow on such a marriage ! It was with real grief for the parents and Annette, and with a sense of deep humiliation, that he turned homewards, as if a shade of guilt had fallen over that peaceful village. The deadly poison had been chosen out, the stimulus of highly wrought excitement had been read about, thought of, dreamed of, and sought after, until no life seemed endurable to Lydia without it. The books that supplied her only mental food had brought her to that state of mind in which she could no longer take pleasure in the tender ties of an affectionate home, but grasped with intense eagerness at what appeared to her more glittering, more showy and exciting. Her whole mind was warped.

To Alma the shock was very great. For some days she was quite ill, there was no doubt of her sorrow,—and it was not till she was better that Uncle Matthew meant to speak fully to her, and tell her his opinion of Lydia Wray and of her motives. But impulsive and sensitive as she was,

when her mind had decided a difficult question, Alma could act with great promptitude and resolution. She had spent many painful hours in her room, and at length her decision was made. She sat watching from her window one evening for Uncle Matthew's return from the village, and as he shut the hall door she walked down to the study. "Well, my dear, what have you got there?" said he, glancing at a large brown paper parcel she carried in her hands.

Then Alma spoke out at once, though her voice shook, "Uncle Matthew, I don't wish to feel as if I was deceiving you, but here are some more of those books you did not wish me to have."

"I'm sorry my dear, very sorry," said he, greatly pained, "but you are quite right to tell me. How did you get them?"

"In the same way; and I wanted to send them back, but I don't know how."

"Have you read any, Alma?"

"Yes, some."

"Well, tell me which you have read, my dear." She pointed out their names. He looked them over, and presently said, "Now Alma, I will ask you first one question. Have I ever denied you any of the books in the library which I thought suitable for you?"

"Oh no, Uncle Matthew."

"You did not take to these from want of books then. And I think I have encouraged your reading books of imagination which I thought desirable?"

"Oh yes, Uncle Matthew."

"I have wished to cultivate your feelings and imagination by the representation of good and noble and beautiful thoughts and actions. Is that the feeling these books have given you? Have you ever carried away anything worth having from them? I cannot but think that many of them would have shocked and bewildered you, have confused right and wrong, and made you feel how low and base human beings can be, without pointing to any aim or hope of a higher kind to lift them out of the depth into which they have sunk. Why did you read them, my dear? You must have known I should not approve of it."

"I grew interested in some of the stories,——"

"Now Alma, do tell me,—if the question should ever arise of your being asked to marry any one, do you think these stories would help or guide you in any right decision?"

"I can't tell,—well no, I don't think they would."

"I think it is just from living upon them that

Lydia has thrown herself away ; to what extent I cannot say."

Alma's tears now came fast, as she thought of the grief at the Farm.

He repeated, as if half to himself, " Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report ; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." And is it, he thought, one of the results of our much-boasted civilization, that these solemn words of advice given 1800 years ago, should be neglected by our young maidens, and thought unnecessary in a Christian country of the present day ?

" Oh ! Uncle Matthew," exclaimed the girl, " I never will again, I will always ask you."

And he knew well that Alma would keep her word.

" Let us rather pray dear child, that those great and noble gifts of imagination and feeling, and power in literature, may be consecrated to that good use, when all writers may feel they are labourers in the Master's service, helping to raise and beautify that glorious building made without hands."

CHAPTER XVII.

FAIRYLAND AND REALITY.

THE garden of Hurst Manor contained many sheltered spots, from which could be seen a little picture of slope of grassy down, or rich distant country, framed in a bower of clematis and wild berries and flowers. Near one of these openings sat a young girl, not idle or dreaming, but intently absorbed in her attempts to represent the scene before her. She had sat there for more than an hour, and now her whole attention was so engaged in her work, that she did not hear the approaching footstep till Miss Treherne remarked, "I did not think I should have left you so long alone, but I was detained. How nicely you have got on!"

"Oh! I wish so I could do it; this is such a beautiful peep,—only one never can do enough in the time."

"I suppose then the time runs away too fast, and so you do not mind being alone."

"Oh no! I do not feel alone then."

"I think you must feel something as I do, when I sit down to talk to the piano, and try and tell it what I mean; it is my companion then."

"Perhaps so."

"I think it must be such a pleasure to paint; I always think it must make one so much more alive to all the beautiful things around one, and you must feel to be taking them in and feasting upon them, all the time you are trying to put them on paper. It must be soothing and refreshing I am sure, and be a lift up out of other things."

The girl looked up brightly, and then said, "Well, I think that is just how I seem to feel it."

"I suppose you have painted a good deal at Ivyton."

"Oh no!"

"But how is that?"

No answer came till Miss Treherne had repeated the question, and then Alma answered, "I don't quite know, but there never seems any fit time for it."

"But you are not so hard at work dear, you say."

"No, but such things are never expected. I

believe Aunt Letty would think I was wasting my time."

"Why so?" asked Miss Treherne. "She likes your occupying yourself in music, doesn't she, and why not in drawing?"

Alma leant over the paper, and began drawing little strokes at the side of her picture, and then she said, half unwillingly, "Aunt Letty makes a great point of my practising, but that's not the same, I don't care for that."

"Do you dislike it then, do you mean? Can't you say so?"

Alma shook her head.

"Has she any objection to your drawing?"

"I once heard her say it was a selfish amusement, so different from music."

"*Selfish*! well, I don't mean to allow it to be a selfish amusement for you," said Miss Treherne, kindly, "for I find a great deal of pleasure in watching that nice drawing, and I intend to have a great deal more while you are here. I wonder if you could make me a copy of that little Italian picture you admired so much; I want one for a friend."

"I am afraid it's too hard, but I can try."

"You shall have every requisite, paper, colours, brushes, quiet,—indeed a room all to yourself while

I am busy in the mornings, and you must make a nice copy."

"Oh! if I can."

Sir Richard Treherne had been called away from Hurst Manor, by some pressing business, and Miss Treherne had asked that Alma might visit her during her father's absence. The fortnight for which she originally came had grown into three weeks, and the visit seemed likely to be still prolonged. Alma felt in no hurry to come to the end of it, for though, when Uncle Matthew left her looking grave, and went back sadly to Ivyton without her, she had felt it a kind of honourable banishment, yet the time spent with Miss Treherne had confirmed her first impressions, and the girl felt her a friend already.

And the time so spent had been very good for Alma, for it had given her a complete change of ideas, and had done much to soothe and quiet her, and show her a new picture of life. She was interested in the new place, the pretty garden well stocked with flowers, the beautiful paintings inside the house, but most of all in the gracious kindness which made all so pleasant to her. She liked to see Miss Treherne amongst her flowers, or speaking to the workpeople, or visiting the cottages, or playing with the children, and to find everywhere the

same charm of her influence. When a party of young cousins came to spend the day at Hurst Manor with them, Ella was like the favourite elder sister, to whom the little ones clung when the big dogs bounded round them, and to whom boys and girls applied as the great authority in every doubtful point. Alma saw in her the best friend to every one, the most gracious lady, and was daily learning to appreciate her more highly. And all the while, Ella Treherne was quietly observing the girl, and was pleased to see her improved in looks and spirits, and to feel how many points of union had developed between them.

By degrees she had led on Alma to talk of her life at Ivyton; she had become acquainted with Annette, with old Molly, with Master Castle, with Becca in the Springs' cottage, and little Teddy and Esther. Not till they had grown more or less intimate would she approach the subject of Alma's own difficulties, for she knew that a sense of delicacy of what she owed to her friends must keep her from making any actual complaints, and perhaps it might only be by accidental hints that it would be possible to give any actual advice. So she watched and waited, and perhaps an opportunity would come.

One balmy summer evening they were sitting by

the open window, watching the brilliant western hues of crimson and gold fading in the sky, till the twilight tints deepened, and the stars had begun to glimmer over the slopes ; their books had been laid aside, and Miss Treherne had been asking Alma about her favourite spots and views on the downs, more with the manner of one who knew and loved them herself, than of one who was ignorant of them, when the girl exclaimed, " But after all, you must know them yourself better than I do, because you have lived here always."

" Yes, I do know them well, certainly ; and there is not a step but is familiar to me, either wandering over them on foot, or cantering over them with a pony."

" Oh, how delightful ! Then did you ride about with Sir Richard ?"

" Not often with my father."

" Oh ! then you were alone. I should think that would be nicer still."

" No, I was not alone, my brother was with me then."

" Your brother ! I didn't know you had one."

" I *had* one once ; he was ten years older than myself ; he died six years ago."

" Oh ! I'm very sorry, I wouldn't have asked if I had known," said Alma, in a distressed voice.

"You were not likely to know, dear," said Miss Treherne, very gently. "He was the best, the tenderest of brothers. He was a grown man when I was a mere girl, but he would take me with him in his walks or his rides, and never did I come back without feeling as if I had taken in something fresh and invigorating from his conversation. He taught me to ride, and he taught me to skate, and took me out with him in a boat, and made me observe all beautiful things. I learnt from him all I know about the stars,—all the names I told you last night. Then he took such an interest in all my studies; he taught me to love beautiful poetry and really good books, and his mind was so pure, and his taste so refined that he was an admirable guide. And still more did he teach me to know what was good and worth loving in others, but most of all to feel that a noble and tender-hearted man, whom God had given me for my brother, was the greatest blessing of my life."

"He must have been very good then," said Alma, in a low tone.

"Yes, he was indeed good,—I cannot often think of him, but your question led me to speak of him to-night. He was obliged to go to the West Indies to look after my father's estates, and I never saw him again. He died while out there."

"Oh dear! how dreadful!" cried Alma. "How could you bear it?"

"It had to be borne," said Miss Treherne, very gently," and other losses as well. I do not know how it would be if we did not feel that our treasures were safe in our Father's keeping. But even with that belief, it changed my life, which ever since then has been different, and often very lonely."

Alma looked up at her friend in surprise, "*You lonely!* with so many people who want you, so many who love you."

Ella's face had been turned away, but she now looked down on the young girl, with a sad yet quiet expression, as she answered, "Yes, thank God! there are many who love me, and some to whom I may be of use; but some losses in life cannot be repaired."

And this, thought Alma, was the dear gracious lady, so helpful to all others, so cheerful, so bright in general, and yet with so much sorrow in her heart.

"But I had a life very full of duties, which with all its demands and necessities has a strengthening and also a soothing effect, and that no doubt is a help especially intended for me. And now dear, let us come away from the window, and I will play you that piece of Beethoven's you wanted to hear."

Then her hands passed over the notes, making them tell of sorrow and loss, of vain longing and passionate despair, till a low musical strain led on gradually to a sense of hope in the soul, catching the same burthen again and again, struggling on for hope through the darkness and dreariness, clinging to it, striving for it, glorying in it, and at length ending in a burst of praise and joy.

And when Alma, alone in her own room, thought over what she had heard, she could not but admire more and more that same dear lady, so helpful, and so needed by others ; cheering and guiding all, and yet bearing nobly and meekly a hidden burthen of sorrow.

How small and unworthy did her own spirit, fretted by the petty annoyances of her life, now appear to her ; and the influence of a woman of superior mind was slowly, but steadily beginning to raise and strengthen her.

Alma, like many young girls, was very keenly alive to the impressions made on her imagination by those around her, and was strangely attracted by the grace and nobility of character of a friend several years older than herself. Ella Treherne seemed raised above the depressing influences by which she herself was drawn down, and Alma

wished to be like her. By degrees the talk turned more than once on the difficulties at Ivyton, when Alma mentioned her desire to leave it, and her wish for another sort of life.

"How I should like to talk to you as if I knew you well," said Miss Treherne; "your uncle has often done so to me, when I was a girl."

"O do please!" exclaimed Alma, "I should like it so much."

"Well then, tell me in the first place what sort of life you mean."

Alma couldn't quite tell, but it must be a life in which she could take an interest, something to which she could devote herself.

"That may be all very true dear, in a general sense, but it is rather vague."

"What I want is something more definite, to which I could give myself, and I should feel more interest in it. When I hear of good women working among the poor, I think I should like that better than almost anything; something that I could put first as an object in life, like the missionaries we were talking of last night, who gave up body and soul to their duty."

"They were indeed great and noble men, and few can be like them. But do you think, my dear, that most women can choose their circumstances?"

I think that it is a mistake. I am inclined to think that for most of us, the circumstances are given us, and we have to make our duties out of these materials, and according as we do that, our lives may be ill or well directed, and happy or unhappy."

"O dear! Miss Treherne, do you think it wrong then to wish for a nobler, a more elevated life?" cried Alma, in a disappointed tone.

"The *wish* is not wrong certainly, but I should think you wrong if you were to throw aside your present duties in order to gratify it. Besides Alma, you talk of working among the poor, surely there is plenty to be done in Ivyton in that way. Carry as much as you can of the devoted spirit into your life by all means, wherever it may be; but I rather think if we *could* choose our circumstances, we women should be very apt to grow narrowed in by them, and end in worshipping them."

Alma sat very silent for a long time, when at length she said, "After all, it would make *such* a difference if Aunt Letty liked me!"

Miss Treherne could hardly help smiling at poor Alma's vehemence, as she added,—“but I know instead she dislikes me very much!” Ella did not waste the time in contradicting this assertion, but with gentle tones and a soothing hand on Alma's head, she told her it was not wise to dwell

on such a thought, which could only bring pain and harm to both. "Besides, you must try and make Aunt Letty like you," she said, half playfully.

"You must remember Aunt Letty has been used to her own ways for a good many years; she has a right to them, and it is your duty to fall into them pleasantly as much as you can. Besides, even at Aunt Letty's age, people may learn something, and perhaps she will. Think how much you owe them, for you have had kindness, you have had a home given you, and you cannot doubt about the affection for you on one side. *Somebody* must have cared about you very much, dear, or you would never have been at Ivyton at all; there was no necessity for it, that I am aware of."

"O yes; and if Aunt Letty was like uncle Matthew it would be all different; but she has no sympathy with girls of my age, I am sure."

"And is there no duty on your side, even if you do not meet with all you would wish? Is there not a call upon you to try and repay them somewhat for all their care?"

"But," said Alma, "I should like to be fond of the people I lived with, and do things from affection, not duty. I don't like duty."

"I think you are wrong there, dear; I think affection without duty to guide it often fails; I

have seen it amongst married people, I have seen it between parents and children, and where the sense of duty was wanting, it generally produced a failure."

"Then do you mean you think it is my duty to stay at Ivyton?"

"I do, dear, at present, certainly."

It all made Alma feel very grave, and two large tears stood in her eyes, but there was something in the half-motherly, half-sisterly tone, and the kind arm laid round her neck, that made her also feel more soothed than vexed.

Strangely enough there came back to her mind the conversation with Annette nearly a year ago, when they had met upon the downs.

What a blessing it may be to a young girl to have a wise friend, several years older than herself; who, as a grown woman, sees things from a different point of view, and yet can fully sympathize with the difficulties of youth. Alma recognized this with Miss Treherne very thoroughly, and she learnt to look up to her with confidence and affection during the time she spent at Hurst Manor.

What pleasant and interesting books they read together! What delightful walks on the breezy downs, with drives through the bushy lanes in the rich valley below!

And Alma's drawing had gone on so well ; she had made a very nice copy of the little Italian landscape, for which Miss Treherne insisted upon giving her two pounds, telling Alma she could not have got any one to do it for so little. What a pleasure to have gained that money ! and it gave Alma the feeling of a new capability in herself.

About this time she received a short letter from John. He had not written for a long time, and he was now spending his holidays at Lady Anstey's country house, where he had as much amusement as could be crammed into the twenty four hours, and was petted and spoilt to her ladyship's pleasure. It was all very jolly, said John, and it all fitted into his extravagant and heedless tastes, in a way that suited him very well. But the purport of his letter was to tell Alma that Lady Anstey had made her a present of a ten pound note, "so write at once to thank her for it as prettily as you can." Alma did as she was desired, and after many attempts wrote a very shy and formal note, which she enclosed to John, remarking to him at the same time, that the money would be especially acceptable to her at present. But John thought it best not to trust the money to the post, it might wait till he saw her.

The business which occupied Sir Richard met

with unforeseen delays, and as he was still absent from home, Miss Treherne begged that Alma's visit might be yet further prolonged. In this manner nearly two months had passed away very pleasantly, and Alma had learnt to know and admire her new friend more thoroughly. The new books, the delightful music, the paintings she was never tired of examining, and above all, the many interesting conversations upon subjects of a varied kind, filled her mind with refreshing thoughts, and gave her the feeling of looking over a wider horizon, and of breathing more freely than she could with Aunt Letty. "But it must all come to an end some time," she said to herself rather sadly, "and then I shall feel just as I did before."

One brilliant September day, a long expedition had been planned over night, to a distant ruined castle not yet visited. "We are to join some friends, and have a picnic among the walls, and you must see if you can draw anything, for it is a most picturesque place."

Alma's bright look told her pleasure.

Oh! those pretty wooded lanes, hedged by the branching bushes and red berries, over which the honeysuckle and wild briony flung their luxuriant

wreaths, while undisturbed September flowers starred the ground, where a few stray cattle grazed on the deep long grass by the roadside.

Such a quiet lonely country it seemed, where you met no one but perhaps a farmer's light pony cart hurrying on to the market town, or a few gipsies encamped on the unenclosed ground over which their ponies and donkies were straying. In that still, sunny air, you could hear from a long distance the sound of wheels grinding the shingly road, and meet at length the large laden waggon, with its team of splendid farm horses, decorated with green branches to keep off the flies, and making a musical sound with the chime of bells that shook on their red collars. And behind, over the oak woods, the beautiful downs rose higher and higher in the distance, looking quiet and still over the rich country spread out at their feet.

All on a sudden, through a gap in the hedge, the expanse of low marshy country spread out brown and bare, ending in a sunny stretch of distant shingle, and a rim of distant blue shining sea.

And here you come to the old castle, with its noble towers on each side of the gateway, and its turrets at the corners ; all looking so perfect that Alma exclaimed in surprise at seeing nothing but an empty shell inside.

"You are astonished, I see," said a lady who had joined them at the gate," as I was when first I saw it; everything looks so perfect outside, you expect almost to walk into a large house."

"Yes, indeed I did; but did it fall down, or how did it happen?"

"No it did not fall while it was inhabited, but one of its possessors, about fifty years ago, took a fancy to dismantle it in that way. It looks like the work of some mischievous sprite. It was lived in up to that date."

"O dear! how I should have disliked any one who pulled it down."

The lady smiled at her eagerness and remarked, "It aways reminds me of the Castle of the Sleeping Beauty, and one expects to find it inhabited by those who are just waking from their sleep of a hundred years—

"All round a hedge upshoots, and shows
At distance like a little wood;
Thorns, ivies, woodbine, misletoes,
And grapes with bunches red as blood;
All creeping plants, a wall of green
Close matted, burr and brake and brier,
And glimpsing over these just seen,
High up, the topmost palace-spire."

only they are towers, not a spire here."

It did indeed look a dreamy place, where the

white empty walls were filled alone with rich beds of wild strawberry and branching dog roses, while ivy and creeping plants flung their tendrils across the empty window frames, which looked as if gazing on the giant oaks that bowed their heads and spread their guardian branches around the old building.

A few other ladies and some gentlemen had arrived, and when Miss Treherne had collected all the party, she proposed sitting down in one of the sheltered nooks, "which we can make our dining room," said she, "it may have been that for all I know."

Then she made Alma help her in spreading the table for luncheon, over which there was a great deal of merry talk, and many amusing and interesting stories were told by the gentlemen, to which the bright-looking girl sitting near Miss Treherne, listened in silence but with evident enjoyment. And at times she was wondering if John would ever be like these gentlemen, so amusing and pleasant, so thoughtful and kind; and also what Aunt Letty would say to seeing her there.

At length she stole off to her drawing, having already settled in her own mind the point from which she would sketch the gateway and towers she so much admired. Thoroughly absorbed in

her own work, she sat there while the rest of the party wandered in scattered groups about the old buildings, or strolled on the rich turf outside the walls, or where the old oaks

“Knotted to the knees in fern”

made a refreshing shade from the mid-day glare.

The sun had already gone down far behind the highest trees, and their trunks were casting broad shadows over the grass, nearly up to her feet, before Alma heard herself called by Miss Treherne.

“It is getting rather late, and we have a long drive home, but stay,—before you shut up, I want to have a look at your drawing. What do you say to it? You know more about it than I do,” she added, addressing a gentleman who stood beside her.

Alma started, and felt very shy, as she became aware of the presence of a tall imposing looking gentleman, who was inspecting her drawing over her shoulder.

“Let me see,” said he, raising a pair of gilt glasses to his eyes; “very nice,—very good! how well you have put in your gateway, and your oaks are a good massive hue. If I might suggest to a young lady, I should say, a touch more sunlight gleaming through the trees to bring out the colour of the bricks. An object to tell the size is also desirable.”

"Yes, I mean't to put in that lady in the red shawl," said Alma shyly.

"Quite right. But you mustn't leave all this space empty, you know. Where is your foreground?" and he pointed with a large hand, on which Alma perceived a handsome seal ring; but in this case it suited with its owner.

Alma's head bent down till her face was hidden by her straw hat, as she answered, "Yes, I mean't to put in those tall reeds and bulrushes, and the pool just behind me, only I couldn't quite sit there."

"You couldn't sit in the pond dear, certainly," said Miss Treherne laughing, "but I hope father, you approve of this drawing."

"Very much indeed," he said cordially. "But Ella, you have not told me which of your friends I am criticizing so freely."

"Haven't I? This is Miss Sherbrook, Papa, who is staying with me you know."

Then the tall gentleman stepped forward, and most courteously took off his hat, and held out his hand to the shy girl sitting on the grass, saying, "And I am delighted to make Miss Sherbrook's acquaintance, and to find her still with you." Then with rather old-fashioned politeness, he thanked the young lady for having made his

daughter's solitude so pleasant during his unavoidably long absence, while Alma, with very flushed cheeks, could only stammer out a few words to express how the obligation was all on her side, till Miss Treherne broke in with the question, "But how did you ever find us Father, for I had no idea you were coming home to-day."

"I suppose as you went out early, my dear, you had not received my telegram saying I should like to be met at Ashpole, but as I found from your little groom at Ashpole that you had all gone on to the Castle, I thought I would join your party on the way back."

"That was very nice, only I wish you had come earlier, for we have had such a pleasant day. But won't you have something to eat, Father? we made an excellent luncheon, but we were not greedy enough to eat up everything."

"Thank you, my dear Ella, but I would rather wait for my proper dinner hour," said Sir Richard, with a wave of his hand.

Alma was rather alarmed at finding herself seated opposite the tall fine-looking gentleman, and felt as if his eye must be constantly upon her, but he talked to his daughter most of the way home. They drove out from the old oaks, leaving those solemn silent ruins behind them, though at

turns of the road they would re-appear again in a most unexpected position, giving Alma yet more the feeling that it was a fairy castle.

It was growing quite late, and she was dreaming over this thought, when Miss Treherne called to the coachman to stop at the lodge by which they were about to enter Hurst Manor.

“Old Mrs. Phillis is ill, Father,” she said, in explanation, “and I want to hear what the doctor says of her. Oh ! there he is himself.”

A short conversation followed, of which Alma only caught the doctor’s concluding words,—“for I must go round by Ivyton.”

“Is somebody ill at Ivyton ?” enquired Miss Treherne.

“Mrs. Erle has had a fall ; perhaps you have not yet heard.”

“No, indeed ; not a bad one, I hope.”

“Well, it was rather a severe shake, and she has sprained her ankle badly ; and now the difficulty will be to keep her quiet enough.”

“I am very sorry indeed, Alma ! you had not heard of this.”

“No, Uncle Matthew has not written for several days.”

The doctor was in a hurry, and remarked, as he prepared to drive off, “I can tell you more about it to-morrow.”

Miss Treherne was silent, and Alma remarked in
• an undertone, "I hope it's only a sprained ankle."

"*Only* a sprained ankle! There is all the difference between one sprain and another. I have often heard, a sprained ankle *may* be worse than a broken bone."

"O dear! I hope not," cried Alma. No one could see her face in that dim light, but she turned very hot and uncomfortable.

"Have you any letter from Ivyton this morning?" asked Miss Treherne, at breakfast.

"None at all; so I suppose there cannot be much the matter."

"Well, the doctor will be at Mrs. Phillis' lodge this morning, and you can hear what he says."

The account proved to be, that the ankle was severely sprained and swollen, that Mrs. Erle was very feverish and fidgety, and would keep going about, whereas she ought to keep perfectly quiet.

"She says she is obliged to go and see after everything, and I suppose it may be so; but she really ought to have some one with her. I did ask Miss Wray to go and look after her a little, but then her own mother is so often laid up."

"Then I afraid it is a bad sprain," observed Alma, timidly.

"Yes, and the fall has shaken her considerably. But I thought you lived at Ivyton, young lady;" said Mr. Hughes, looking at her with astonishment.

"I,—I was here on a visit," said Alma, with some confusion.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," said Mr. Hughes, bowing politely as he left.

"And now dear, what will you do?" said Miss Treherne. "I will send you back to Ivyton directly after lunch, and then you can tell for yourself."

"Thank you!" was all Alma said then, for she was considering. She wondered Uncle Matthew had not let her know, and felt rather hurt and vexed that he had not done so.

Aunt Letty would not like her to go back without sending any notice; indeed, would she like her to go back at all without being told to come? She never wished Alma to do anything for her, and that would probably still be the case.

So after a little pause, Alma answered, "I hardly know what to do."

"Do you doubt Alma, what to do? Go by all means, and see how Mrs. Erle is for yourself. If the hurt proves a trifle, well and good; and if you are not wanted, come and stay with me a little longer. I should be sorry if a misfortune brought your stay to an end."

Many thoughts were passing through the girl's mind. In the first place, she had been so happy with Miss Treherne, that it gave her much pain to have her pleasant dream come to an end, feeling she must return to many things she did not like, but could not alter. And after all, she thought, "if Aunt Letty was ill, she would not allow me to be of use to her."

After standing irresolute for a few minutes, she said with a shaking voice and tears starting, "The fact is you have made me so happy, dear Miss Treherne, that I don't like going."

"And indeed I'm very glad to have made you happy, dear," said Miss Treherne, smiling. "But I should be sorry if I had not also helped my dear little friend to go back in a happier and more hopeful state of mind, to try and fulfil the duty that has fallen to her share."

And then she kissed Alma very tenderly, adding, "I think you feel it is the right thing to do."

"Yes," said Alma, half unwillingly.

"You will have an opportunity of proving to Aunt Letty how grateful and thoughtfully affectionate you can be, and that is just what you would wish. Now tell me, shall I go with you, or not?"

"I think perhaps," said Alma, after consideration, "Aunt Letty might like it best if I went alone."

“Very well ; you can keep the carriage till you know what to do. If you find it best to stay, I shall come and see after you to-morrow.”

How the balance of the girl's mind varied upwards and downwards in the course of that drive ! The pleasant remembrances of all those weeks made her feel rich in treasures not to be forgotten, and yet her spirits sobered down at the idea of returning to the old state of circumstances at Ivyton. But she had gained much, for her mind had recovered its tone ; she had found fresh interests and learnt something of her own powers ; and above all, she felt she had made a valued friend, and could now turn for sympathy to a superior woman whom she loved and admired.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ILLNESS AND POVERTY.

"WILL you stop outside the gate, and I can go in and see if I come back, or send a message to Miss Treherne."

"Very well miss," said the kind old coachman, "I've to go up to Mr. Wray's, so that will just give you a little time without hurry."

Alma walked up to the door of the Vicarage with a beating heart, though she scarcely knew what she feared. All looked as quiet and unchanged as if everything had gone to sleep since she left it two months ago; only the berries upon the Indian thorn that climbed up the house were turning crimson, and the flowers in the beds upon the little lawn looked rather autumnal and battered. Uncle Matthew's study window had the blind pulled down, and in Aunt Letty's bedroom above, the window was also partially darkened. The front door however was not locked, (people did not usually lock their doors in Ivyton,) so she walked in.

There was no one in the drawing room, or dining room, or study; yet every chair and table stood in its usual place; only she observed a great gap in one of Uncle Matthew's favourite book shelves. Turning to the staircase, she noiselessly crept up it; Aunt Letty's bedroom door was shut, and she never ventured upon disturbing her there.

There was nothing left but to turn to the kitchen. Old Nancy was sweeping up the hearth; she was a little deaf, and being startled at the sound of a voice near her, exclaimed, "Mercy me! Miss Alma, I thought that it was only puss. Where did you come from?"

"I came in at the door, two minutes ago; but where is everybody?"

"Dear! how you made me jump;—why I a-most thought you was never coming back again no more."

"Why? what should make you think that?" said Alma, in an annoyed tone. "But Nancy, where is—your mistress?"

"Well, didn't you know Missis had hurt herself? She's up a-bed to-day."

"Oh! Nancy, is it as bad as that?"

"Doctor says so. I don't see no good keeping folks in bed," said the old woman rather crossly, "and givin' 'em a parcel of stuff. It makes a bill."

"Oh! but I'm afraid she is ill then."

"She aint *well* for that matter, you may be sure; but she might be in a day or two."

"And is your master out?"

The old woman turned sharply round.—"The Parson! why, he's gone off up to London, he went all of a hurry on Monday, and he ain't back yet, though it's Friday."

"What did he go for, Nancy, do you know?"

"Catch me asking, Miss Alma. I don't know sure, but I guess he was sent for about some money matters. Had some big letters, all on 'em looking the same."

"And why are there some empty shelves in the study?"

"Oh! you've seen that! I can tell you that then. Well, the Parson have took some of his best books up to London to sell, he wants money, that's it."

"Oh! Nancy, I'm very sorry; I didn't know it."

"Well, you may know it now, for everybody in Ivyton does."

"Nobody told me," said Alma, rather sadly; "but I'm come home now."

"Are you, Miss Alma? But your room isn't ready."

"But can't Fanny get it ready for me?"

The old woman looked at her in surprise. Fanny went away three weeks ago, her mother wanted her."

"But is there nobody in her place?"

"Nobody's come; and Missis says she meant to do without, except somebody from the village o'Saturday; bits of girls from the school like."

Perhaps this was what made old Nancy look cross, and as Alma was considering whether she could ask the cause of this change, she continued, "It was all along of that as Missis hurt herself."

"How was that Nancy? Do tell me all about it."

"Why, when she see me clean done up, she must come and help herself, and she tired herself quite out, so as she was carrying a tray of preserving jars, I suppose she caught her foot again something, and down she came with them. My patience! it just made a terrible mess, and poor Master's quince jelly that he's so fond of were all spoilt, and she had sprained her ankle that bad, poor lady. But she bound it up, and wouldn't nurse up no how, and that's how she's made it just bad."

"O dear! Nancy, I wish I'd known; I would have come here before," said Alma, penitently.

"Would you? Well it looked queer your not coming."

"Can I go up now? You can tell her first."

Nancy looked out of the window, with a sort of grunt, and remarked, "Miss Annette will be here soon, she'd best take you up."

"What can she do then? I thought Mrs. Wray was ill."

"So she is; but Miss Annette she comes to help Missis all she can; and all along of the time she's here, poor Missis she takes on sadly and says how much better off Mrs. Wray is that's got a daughter to help her, and what will poor Master do with his self. She's terrible low, and Miss Annette's enough to do between the two."

Alma enquired in a constrained voice whether anything had been heard of Lydia.

"Nothing! nor no loss neither," said Nancy shortly.

Alma left the kitchen to write a note to Miss Treherne, to be sent back by the coachman. Sitting down to wait for Annette, an indescribable sense of discomfort and loneliness stole over her; the empty room in which she had often sat uncomfortably with Aunt Letty, seemed quite deserted and as if a reproach to her.

And here was Annette Wray performing the duty that she ought to fulfil. She waited in a very downcast mood, looking for Annette's well

known form to appear at the gate. After a long interval she arrived.

"O how glad I am to see you are come home dear!" exclaimed Annette; "I suppose they told you."

"Nobody told me from here, so I knew nothing about Aunt Letty till by chance yesterday, and now I don't know what to do. Nancy thought I had better wait till you came."

Poor girl! she looked very much distressed and perplexed. Annette said kindly, "Perhaps I had better go and tell Mrs. Erle first then, or she may be startled."

Aunt Letty was lying on her bed half dressed, looking very flushed and feverish. In answer to Alma's half timid kiss she said, "It's a pity you shortened your visit and came away my dear, while I am laid up."

"I came,—I wanted—," stammered out Alma.

"She came because she heard you had met with an accident, dear Mrs. Erle, and she wanted to help to nurse you well," kindly put in Annette.

"Well, I'm very much obliged to her, but it's a pity; I hope I shall not be laid up long. Are you quite well, Alma?"

"Yes, very well, thank you, Aunt Letty," said Alma, in rather a shaky voice.

"I hope you have enjoyed your visit."

"O yes, very much indeed."

"Ah well! I'm very sorry you shortened it for me."

"Now I think we must look at my poor invalid," said Annette decidedly, beginning to unwrap the foot.

Such a poor bruised, swollen ankle it was, which Aunt Letty, while persisting in taking no care of it, had driven into a state bordering on inflammation. Alma made an involuntary expression of sympathy, which however Aunt Letty checked by saying, "There now, Alma, you had better go away, I would rather have only one."

"Do let her stop and help me," said Annette, kindly, "I shall do all the better."

"O no, my dear; it makes me nervous."

"Then go down, dear, and tell Nancy to get some soup," said Annette, giving her a gentle hint to be gone.

It was a sad repulse to the girl, and she felt very much pained. "I am come home, and can do nothing; I might just as well have stayed away. Miss Treherne would not have done so."

She was sitting in a hopeless, depressed way, with traces of tears on her face, when Annette came down. "Don't be too grieved dear," she

said, kissing Alma, "Mrs. Erle was in great pain, and she was rather taken by surprise. I daresay she will be different to-morrow. I will try and get you into the way of doing little things for her. She was rather upset too, because she had just heard that Mr. Erle was not coming home for Sunday ; here is a letter she wished me to put into the post, asking Mr. Fuller to take the service."

"Oh ! Annette, I do wish Uncle Matthew was come home ; I don't know what to do without him."

"Can't you do something for him ?" said the practical Annette. "Does his study want setting to rights ? or stay, there are these pretty chimney piece ornaments that Mrs. Erle always dusts and washes herself, have not been looked after, for she has not been equal to anything for days. I would look round and do something ; it will make you feel less dreary. Now I really must go home. Good-bye dear !"

Alma took her advice ; it made the empty rooms feel more inhabited, and she afterwards found a few things in which she could help old Nancy. At length, late in the evening, there came a request that Miss Alma would bring up her work, and sit with Mrs. Erle.

She was in a less unhappy state of mind, poor

lady, and wished to hear a little about Miss Treherne, and was pleased to know that Sir Richard was come home. But the girl was constrained and nervous, and conversation did not flow easily, and it was a relief when Aunt Letty told her she looked tired and had better go to bed.

How different it all was from Hurst Manor! and how she missed the graciousness and soothing that pervaded everything, and formed the charm of her life there. How she longed for it, and for the sound of the footstep, and for a smile from that sweet face that looked in upon her every night. Even the comfort and ease of a large well-arranged house, with its luxuries, was not without its influence. Her own little room, furnished with strict economy, even seemed different from usual.

Was she spoilt by the pleasant life she had been leading for the last two months? Was she going to show her kind friend that she repaid her kindness by returning to Ivyton yet more discontented than she went away? Was this the result of soothing advice, of intimate conversations and tender confidences? Did not the words about "*duty*" still ring in her ears? *Duty* to stand as a support and guide to her when affection failed,—*duty* to show her the right course. Was it a time now to think of leaving those who had meant to show her

so much real kindness, when they were falling into poverty and distress, with Aunt Letty laid by and suffering ?

She felt ashamed and angry with herself for thinking of such a possibility. "But oh ! I do want guidance,—I want comfort,—I do want help and power to be of any good here." And had not Uncle Matthew always earnestly and gently impressed upon her where to ask that wisdom that is given liberally ? "Pure, peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated," was that wisdom. Had she shown proofs of it by feeling so fretted, so angry, so hopeless, about her duty ?

She prayed earnestly for a better spirit, for more light on her way, and felt less despairing before she fell asleep.

Aunt Letty was fond of flowers, as Alma well knew. Early in the morning she went round the little garden, and gathered a handful, which she tastefully arranged, and carried to the bedside of the invalid. "Thank you Alma, they look very pretty," was not so much of a repulse as the day before, but there was nothing further. In the course of the morning Miss Treherne came ; she consoled and encouraged Alma, but Mrs. Erle sent word that she was not well enough to see her.

The doctor came and ordered her still to keep very quiet, and not set her foot to the ground.

Several weary days followed, and Alma never knew how she should have got through them without Annette's daily help. Mrs. Erle was very much depressed, and many mornings Alma thought she had been crying. She had restless, painful nights, and seemed ill at ease in mind and body. She spoke little, and although in consequence of Annette's persistent entreaties she allowed Alma to be with her a little, to help in nursing her, to read to her sometimes, there seemed no advance to anything further.

Aunt Letty was generally considered a very conscientious woman, and so she was,—but sometimes such persons make very great mistakes. She had rather prided herself on the village girls she had trained in her house, and who were sought for as servants from all quarters; but when her husband had taken into their home a young girl of their own rank, she had little idea of any influence or association beyond that of pointing out her faults. She had never sought to make Alma an object of real interest, never cultivated her companionship, never given up anything on her account; but each went on in their separate way.

And now that she lay sick and weary, fretting

through the long hours when she was ordered to remain quiet, and felt herself quite unfit for her usual occupations, did it ever half unconsciously occur to Aunt Letty how pleasant would have been the sight of a sweet young face, how a bright, happy young life would have cheered her own, but how she had put away the chance of winning this blessing? No, it did not occur to her in this way. But she thought of herself as being ill, and unable to help the husband whom she loved, unable to take her place in the parish, perhaps wearing on into a heavy burthen on his hands through years of helpless suffering, to which were now added the anxieties of poverty. "Poor man! poor dear Matthew!" she exclaimed, as she shed many bitter tears, and prayed with intense earnestness that such a trial might be spared him. Poor lady! she felt very miserable. Yet she would be just and sincere with herself, her conscience admitted she had in her misery been feeling unkind and irritable to Alma; this was not right; besides it would distress her husband. Well! she would try and be kinder to her.

Miss Treherne came very frequently, bringing any little comforts or delicacies for Mrs. Erle, who continued too depressed to see her; but these visits were a source of very great comfort to Alma. A

long fortnight dragged on into nearly three weeks since her return to Ivyton. How slowly time does go under such circumstances! One morning two letters lay upon the breakfast table, one for Alma, the other she sent upstairs for Aunt Letty. Her own was from Uncle Matthew, saying he should be home that very day, and expressing pleasure in the thought of having his little Alma back again. He hoped she had nursed Aunt Letty into being better. Poor man! he evidently did not realize the state of the case in any way.

When Alma, seeing the door of Aunt Letty's bedroom ajar, very quietly pushed it open, she was greatly shocked.

The poor lady was sobbing and crying as if her heart would break. The girl's first impulse was to retire, but she came back, saying soothingly, "Aunt Letty, I hope there's no bad news; Uncle Matthew is coming home to-day."

"Ah! that's just it;—" burst from her lips in bitter anguish.

Alma stood aghast,—she did not understand it; but presently she said sympathetically, "I hope you are not feeling worse, Aunt Letty."

She shook her head, but the tears were unchecked, and she signed to Alma to go away. But for once Alma disobeyed, and with sudden impulse

she went down on her knees beside the bed, exclaiming, "Oh! I wish, I do so wish I could have made you better before he came. He will be so distressed to find you in this way."

The trembling voice and speaking posture told of her sincerity. "I know it; do you think I don't know it! and all the years we've been married, never have I failed to meet him, never have I been prevented from welcoming my husband, and it will be such a shock to him, poor man!"

Old Nancy, who had heard voices as she came upstairs, now popped in her head at the door, and seeing Mrs. Erle's distress, she exclaimed, "Mercy me! Miss Alma, whatever can you be doing to make mistress take on so, and the master coming home as you told me so soon? I think you'd best go downstairs, miss, if you make her cry so."

"No, Nancy, don't send her away; it wasn't her fault," said Mrs. Erle, with a sudden sense of justice to Alma.

"Well, look ye then!" said Nancy, thrusting forward a card, "here's Miss Treherne's sent ye a pheasant, and Miss Annette's sent a fowl, and which be I to do for Master?"

This gave rather a happier turn to her thoughts, and after the point had been discussed a little,

and Nancy had disappeared, Aunt Letty wiped her eyes, and spoke more composedly.

"He seems not to have taken in how bad I am, from his letters."

"So I was afraid," said Alma.

"It will be such a shock to him," she again repeated, as if to herself.

Alma considered, and suggested, "Hadn't I better go to meet him at Ashpole?"

"At Ashpole? why, what good would that do?"

"To let him know you are not yet about."

"Oh no!" she said at first, "it would do no good."

Then presently after consideration she said, "well perhaps; but don't go to Ashpole, you can stop at the Strawberry Gardens."

Old Mrs. Hunter at the Gardens was delighted to see Miss Alma, and would insist on making her a cup of tea while she waited for the parson, and giving her some of his favourite quince jelly to take home, and then she could hear all about their dear lady who was laid up. At length when it was growing quite chill and dark, the sound of wheels was heard, and Alma called from the little garden gate where she stood. Old Rubric came to a stand, and Uncle Matthew exclaimed, "My dear little girl! I'm delighted to see you; but what brings you here so late?"

It was but a short drive home, but while Rubric was going slowly up to the long ascent to Ivyton, Alma had managed to tell him fully about Aunt Letty's state, and also to confide in him by saying how difficult it was to do anything for her. Uncle Matthew was greatly shocked, his wife in her letters had never allowed the extent of the injury, and from Alma's short notes he had failed to understand its severity.

He entered his house unusually silent and depressed. He had returned with no good news to tell her, for the money laid by for their old age, or to enable him to pay a curate, was hopelessly gone, and he might be called upon to pay a large sum in addition. He felt there was no use in denying that they would have to look poverty in the face; the strict economy which had been practised must become more rigid still. His horse must be sold, if anyone would buy him; some more books must go too.

And the question might arise, what it was right to do with Alma, but he could not bear to think about that; besides they must see first of all what ultimately became of John. These thoughts, and many others, were swarming in his mind, but the first thing of all was to try and get Letty well.

Yet sad as were the circumstances of his return,

Alma at once felt an inexpressible relief. The sense of a great misfortune which she was powerless to lessen, the feeling of responsibility for duties she could not take up, the pain for suffering with which she was not allowed to sympathize,—the weight of all these things was lessened by the presence of the one person who had most right to bear it.

Very tenderly, yet very firmly, did Uncle Matthew tell his wife that she must positively make Alma of more use, that she must depute such and such duties to her for the present; they had no one else who ought to be so fit to undertake them, and he could not at present provide anyone.

“But there is Annette,” said his wife, “she is always ready to help, and she has so much more thought and experience.”

“Of course you must expect a difference between seventeen and six and twenty; but my dear Letty, Annette’s hands are quite full with her own home, besides Alma herself very rightly desires to be of use to us while you are laid by.”

Mrs. Erle found it a very hard matter to put aside her own independence, even for a time; but she was obliged to acknowledge her own incapacity at present, and as she never really resisted her husband’s wishes, she gave way. But it cost her

many bitter tears, and she made many sharp remarks to Alma about her inexperience, and thoughtlessness now and then. Yet on the whole matters had mended from the painful state in which they were three weeks back.

Alma consulted with Annette and Miss Treherne in her difficulties whenever it was possible ; from the former she learnt much that was valuable in housekeeping and other practical matters, while Miss Treherne's advice helped in the more perplexing questions of tact, of forbearance, and of self restraint. Both tried to cheer her, and to encourage the hope that a better relation might arise in time.

At length, after an interval of slow progress, Uncle Matthew and Nancy carried Mrs. Erle downstairs. This was something, but she could still scarcely walk a step without pain, and continued much depressed at her own weakness. The doctor talked of getting into the open air as the best restorative, but this made Aunt Letty quite angry ; " how could she get out, when she could not walk, nor get into their little chaise, and it was too cold to sit out."

A thought had occurred to Alma, though she did not know how to carry it out successfully. She looked at the money Miss Treherne had given her,

which she had half destined for another use, and weighed the question in her mind over and over again ; the result was that one morning she went to Uncle Matthew in his study, and laying down the two sovereigns on his desk, she said,—“ Uncle Matthew, Miss Treberne gave me this money, for a drawing I copied ; the doctor has been telling Aunt Letty again that she must go out ;—and I should be so pleased,—I hope you will take this money to hire a Bath chair to get her out. There are plenty down at the seaside, and Annette says her father will let one be brought up in his waggon.”

When Uncle Matthew fully understood her meaning, he was very much moved, and gently stroking her hand, he answered after a little consideration, “ My dear girl, you are very good, and I feel deeply your kind intention, but I cannot take your money indeed ; you are only too likely to want it.”

“ But Uncle Matthew, you have been so good to me, and I have never given you anything,—and this is my own money you see. I made it.”

“ Then keep it my dear, you have but little as it is, and you may perhaps lose that, as we have done.” Then seeing how the tears rose in Alma’s eyes, he added, “ you must forgive me, my dear, for grieving you, but indeed I cannot take it. But

I shall tell Aunt Letty of your kind, affectionate wish."

Two or three days after, he was considering the best opportunity for telling her, and also how he could possibly provide such a luxury, when a ring at the bell was heard, and Miss Treherne's little groom was seen standing at the door with a note in his hand. Mr. Erle read the note, and called for Alma. "She is gone with a message from me to Annette Wray," said his wife.

"Miss Treherne is going to provide you with a Bath chair, my dear," said he, laying the paper before her.

They had no scruple in accepting the kindness from one who could so well afford it. When a grateful answer had been written and dispatched, he turned to his wife with a grave, kind tone, "Letty! there was a dear good girl who wanted to provide this out of her earnings, and greatly was she disappointed that I refused to let her do so three days ago. I felt that neither of us would wish to take her money,—but you must give her credit for it, Letty, and for the very modest way in which she urged it, as if I should grant her a favour."

Aunt Letty was deeply touched,—“It was a very kind wish, really *very good* of Alma;” and for once she thanked the girl really heartily, •

adding as she kissed her, "I've been cross with you sometimes my dear, but you can't quite understand how bad it is to be laid up."

Aunt Letty began to improve in health and spirits from the first day she was drawn out into the village. How the Ivyton people came out of their doors, and welcomed the good lady at one cottage after another! The women brought out their babies to show how much they had grown, and told of the progress made by their children at school, of their husbands' gains in harvesting, and their own in fruiting, winding up with the history of the ailments of the family. There seemed no time to say all that required to be said. "And the parson, he do look so pleased, and young Miss too, to have our dear lady out again; and so are we, for that matter, though Miss, she's been very kind and attentive, but old friends be best after all."

Miss Treherne did her best to help on the cure, by inviting Mrs. Erle and Alma to Hurst Manor, where nearly three weeks of rest, ease, and better food than she could afford at home, and many drives in a comfortable carriage, did much for the invalid's restoration to her usual health, though she still remained very dependent on Alma's help.

The visit did good in other ways besides, for

Aunt Letty saw how Alma stood in relation to another woman besides herself; and the affection and consideration of one she valued as highly as Miss Treherne, served to cast a reflected light on Alma's character.

"I think you have improved her my dear, very much; for she is grown so much more kind and thoughtful."

Miss Treherne smiled; she did not contradict the assertion, but remarked, "Well, I always did feel interested in her."

And as she watched the girl waiting on Aunt Letty, she thought, "After all, these weeks of dependence may end in drawing them closer, and how pleased I should be to help to a better relation between the two."

So they were drifting on into the winter days, which after all now promised to be spent more happily than last year, had it not been for continual anxiety about John, of whom vague reports brought no good character.

CHAPTER XIX.

—
BECCA SPRING.

AND how had life been going on with Becca Spring during all these months? Not very brightly, though as she thought, "it might have been worse." She sent the children regularly to Ivyton School, and kept them out of harm's way as much as possible. She could not manage her father, for his associates were persons whom she disliked and suspected. And her own future had no cheering prospect. People began to gossip about Jack Standfast, saying how Becca had turned him off, and that he went about now with black haired Bess Dawson, flaunting about in her fine clothes, and in time would marry her. But Aunt Hyde didn't believe it a bit, and she knew Jack better than most people. Then all on a sudden Jack disappeared from the place, and nobody knew where he was gone.

Becca could hardly tell what a load of care she was carrying until any one spoke of him, and then

a weight upon her heart kept her silent, and she went through her duties like one in a dream. Sometimes she saw Miss Annette and Miss Alma, but they could only ask questions in a general way, and in this particular case they could offer no advice. Becca however, had one fast friend, and that was Master Castle. He would come sometimes on the plea of asking after the children, but still more to say a few comforting words to her.

Old Mrs. Spring was not so uncivil to him as she was to most people, for as she said, "Perhaps the old man be come a coorting of Becca, and it would be mighty convenient if she'd marry him." So she rather encouraged his visits to the Old Boat. One cold Sunday in Autumn, Becca was taking the children down to the church in town, partly for a treat to them, and partly to enquire from Aunt Hyde whether she had any news of Jack. It was a fruitless question, and she was sitting very sadly with the children on one of the benches outside the church gates, waiting for the bells to begin, when she saw Master Castle approaching. He didn't perhaps very often get to church, but Teddy begged him to go in with them. Becca was glad of the opportunity of speaking a few words to her old friend.

The bitterness in Becca's heart was soothed by

the service, and she was crying quietly as she left the church; she took the children by the hand as they pressed closely to her, and little Esther knew she was thinking of their poor mother. Master Castle walked on alongside of them for some time without speaking, and then said, "Becca my dear!" (for he had known her from a child,) "you must keep a brave heart for them little ones. I've heard something I've been wanting to tell you." And then he sent the children on in front, adding, "It's about Jack Standfast, you see."

"What is it, Master Castle?" said she starting.

"There's a coastguard as is just come to us fresh from Dover, and it seems he'd a little knowledge of Jack, and he saw him just putting off with a boat to a barque bound for the Baltic. She had just made up her crew, and Jack hailed him, and said he was now a hand on board. She sailed the next day, so our mate saw him no more."

"Was that all, Master Castle?" asked Becca, rather coldly. "And when was it, and what was the name of the vessel?"

"Three weeks ago, and she had a queer name, '*Ben Crookan*,' a Scotch vessel."

Becca did not speak, perhaps it was all nothing to her.

Presently Master Castle said, "I know the

things people say of Jack, but if he deserves his name of 'Standfast,' as I used to think, I don't believe 'em one half."

"Why didn't he write? Why didn't he come near me? They talked about another woman," said Becca, rather proudly.

"Now Becca my dear, don't you believe half what you hear. A young chap may do queer things when he's put out; but that Jack should really take up with the one you mean, I say it's all rubbish. Don't listen to it; just you go on in your own quiet way, and let him have no cause to think you are changed. I know it's hard on you, Becca."

"It is indeed, Master Castle," she said with the tears in her eyes, "but I thank you for your kindness."

"You're a good girl Becca, and Jack never was a bad chap; and there's a Providence over all."

Becca determined to attend to his advice, difficult as it was to keep up her spirits, and especially when her father would bring bad people like Dick Bates to the cottage.

Then when they came to the hill, kind Master Castle took up Teddy and carried him, as the child was tired with his long walk. He set him gently down at the top, and after stooping down to kiss

little Esther, shook Becca long and heartily by the hand, till as Mrs. Spring, who was watching from the window of the Old Boat, remarked, " My patience ! if that silly old man be'ant a-coorting of our Becca again."

CHAPTER XX.

GLOOMY PROSPECTS.

THE winter was setting in very cold, but Uncle Matthew would not allow a fire in his study, as they must be sparing in all directions. He was sitting reading in his great coat, when Alma looked in. "I've got a letter that I don't quite know how to answer, Uncle Matthew," said she, putting it into his hand. The note was as follows :—

"Dear Miss Sherbrook,

"Can you oblige me by telling me what was the amount of the note I sent you by your brother? There has been some slight error, and I wish to find out whether it is my own, or that of my man of business. You must excuse my troubling you.

"Yours truly,

"ELIZABETH ANSTAY."

"What is the difficulty, Alma? You told me, I thought, she had sent you ten pounds."

Alma hesitated;—"Yes,—but then you see——"

"See what? Is there any difficulty; have you spent it, do you mean?"

"Oh no. But I can't say positively, for I've never seen it myself; John said the money should wait till he came. Don't you think I might put off answering the letter till he comes, as he ought to be here at the end of this week?"

"No, you had better write at once."

"But she may be angry with John," pleaded Alma.

"I cannot help that. It is always best to answer enquiries about money as soon as you can, especially in such a case. Just say your brother received it, and had not yet sent it to you, as he was coming soon. And I would write to remind John about it."

After various attempts which she rejected, she wrote,

"Dear Lady Anstey,

"My brother said you had been kind enough to give me a ten pound note, which he would bring when he came home, which I hope he will do in a few days. I am sorry there should have been any mistake.

"Yours truly,

"A. S."

John arrived at the end of the week, and Alma did not know what to make of him. He was obliged to allow that he had not passed. There were few appointments, and as Alma expressed her concern, he said, "Well, you needn't look so horribly shocked ! for Lyon is in the same mess as well." But perhaps this might make him so sullen and downcast, and she vainly tried to arouse him in any way. His manner to Mr. and Mrs. Erle was not improved ; he had lost his store of fun, and his tone was rather defiant. It was evident he had not been going on in any satisfactory way.

After some hours of skating, which she hoped would arouse him, they were returning home in the dusk one evening, when Alma began, "You seem so dull, Johnny ; I did so hope you would be different."

He muttered something in an inaudible tone. "I'm half afraid, but I do hope you haven't got into debt this time."

"No, I'm not in debt," he said.

"Oh, I'm glad you say that ;" and after a pause Alma asked if he could give her the ten pounds now, she should be so very glad of it for a great many things, and Uncle Matthew seemed so badly off just now.

John strode along, and at length, when pressed by her questions, he said, "I really can't let you have it just now."

Alma exclaimed in surprise, "what do you mean? I have counted so much on this money! what have you done with it?"

All on a sudden he stopped, and angrily exclaimed, "Would you have had your brother in the County Court? I was obliged to take it to satisfy a fellow who threatened me with that, and a fine blow up there would have been! And yet you go on dunning me for your miserable ten pounds, when I've told you I was obliged to take it."

Poor girl! she almost felt herself hard upon him; but presently she told him of Lady Austey's letter, which she could not understand at all. "Did she write to you, John?"

"No, I haven't heard from her. Old women may often make mistakes in their accounts."

But *he* could understand it all very well if he chose, though after all, he thought, it was hardly worth doing that for so little.

"I wish you could see what you are to do, John, and perhaps Lady Anstey would help you into something, with what money you have of your own."

“My own! I’ve none,” he said passionately, “it’s all gone, and that’s why I was obliged to take yours.”

Alma stood still in terror; “What can you mean? And now the army is at an end too!”

“Look here!” he said angrily, taking out his watch, “that’s all I have left; my father’s watch, I couldn’t sell that, but every thing else is gone.”

So she saw; his rings and jewellery had all disappeared, and his clothes looked shabby. He had borrowed money at a high interest, had been cheated, and at last had sold out the few hundreds that had been left him by his grandfather. There was nothing for it, he said, but to enlist as his father had done. They entered the house as Alma was praying him not to do this; though perhaps it was one of the best things he could have done. “I am in an awful mess, Alma, and if ever you speak of that money again, I have no chance; but I would rather end my life on a battle field, as my father did.”

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SPANISH SCHOONER.

"WHERE is John?" asked Mrs. Erle the next morning; "he is not usually so late at breakfast."

"I will go and see," said Alma. He was not to be found in his room or anywhere.

"Perhaps he is gone out for a walk, or to see Henry Lyon at his uncle's, but he had better have told us so," said Mr. Erle.

Ten o'clock came, and Alma began to feel very uncomfortable, his words yesterday had alarmed her, and she had heard him tramping up and down the room most of the night.

At length, about eleven o'clock, the baker trotting Crusty along was stopped with the question if he had met Mr. John on his rounds? Yes, he had seen him about nine o'clock, going down to the shore to look at a stranded vessel of which he had heard.

Presently the report came to Ivyton that the

Speranza, of Malaga, a spanish schooner, lay upon the rocks below the Head. She was an old, leaky vessel, ill-manned with a disorderly crew, who would hardly obey the mate, while the captain, being ill, had been left ashore at Gibraltar. The *Speranza* had drifted about in the gales, in a very unseaworthy condition, till either by accident or design, the crew on a dark January night had run her on shore. Guns had been heard through the fog, and now the coastguard had gone out to her, and were helping to unship the cargo, in the hope of lightening the vessel sufficiently for her to be floated off the rocks.

A number of small boats were already swarming round the schooner, either containing boatmen who were ready to give their assistance, or idlers who were looking on, seeking to gain anything they could catch. A crowd of people from all parts had already collected on the beach, some under the cliffs as near as they could approach the stranded vessel, others standing about at the Gap, watching the unloading of the cargo ; while boats of all varieties of build and size were pulled hither and thither, some full, some nearly empty and returning to the vessel, while a confusing and deafening sound of shouts, orders, enquiries, resounded from the usually quiet little haven at the Gap.

Uncle Matthew was among the spectators, with Alma beside him; the poor girl was in such an alarm of anxiety about John, that he had brought her down to the shore, where they hoped to find him. "Have you seen young Mr. Sherbrook?" he enquired of Castle.

"He's gone on board, I believe, sir," was the answer.

"Oh dear! I wish we could get him back," cried Alma; "I am sure he will be doing something unsafe."

The Coastguard Lieutenant was standing near; he remarked good-naturedly, "You needn't be afraid, Miss Alma, your brother is all safe on board; he was working like a young steam engine when I saw him, helping in unloading the cargo. There is no danger."

Alma looked greatly relieved.

"Did your men take him on board?" said Uncle Matthew.

"No Sir," said Castle; Baker said the young gentleman got on board from one of them little nut-shells that are plying about so busy."

"Oh Uncle!" exclaimed Alma, "do send word to him to come back in the coastguard boat, its so much safer."

"Can we send him a message by your men, Mr. Miller?" asked Uncle Matthew.

"Send him whatever message you like, when the boat returns; Davies will be sure to deliver it. I must go off now to the next station." The lieutenant leapt on his grey pony, and cantered off towards the down.

"Where can we see the vessel, Castle?"

"I doubt you can't hardly see her at all sir, for she's wrapped up in the mist between two and three miles eastward."

"Couldn't we walk along the shore, and get near to her?" asked Alma.

"No Miss; she lies right out at the end of the ridge, and you can't get to her any ways nigh. And there's such a lot of rough fellows for you, my dear. If you go about half a mile on, you'll may be see something. Stay! you'll catch your death of cold out here on the beach; best put on this, my little dear," said he, wrapping her in an oilskin cape, that lay beside his two legged stool, for he had seen how Alma was shivering between cold and anxiety. Wrapped up in the coast guard's cape, she stood with Uncle Matthew at a point where they could see the masts of the Spanish schooner dimly through the fog, her bows high up out of the water.

Alma wished John was back, it all looked so very unsafe. "It need not be that, but I wish so

too. Let us go back now, so as not to miss the boat."

They turned back, and went to look at the cargo, where some carts were helping to carry it up beyond high water mark.

Annette Wray and her father were among the spectators. Mr. Wray had come to see if any farm waggons would be required to carry up the cargo from the beach, and convey it to the railway station. Annette joined the other two, and heard what had brought them also.

Such a pile of boxes, cases, cordage, blocks and sails, were heaped up together, mingled with all sorts of things for which Alma knew no name. There were, however, heaps of foreign fruits, oranges, lemons, figs, &c., which had broken out of the barrels and cases, at which a swarm of children looked with eager eyes. Castle, who was guarding the cargo, had much difficulty in keeping their hands off any stray fruits; his strong voice was heard shouting, "You put down them oranges, my lads! Dick! have done with those raisins! Hands off, Bill! and haul out them figs from your pockets; and be off, all of you. Why do you want them Frenchers to think you're nothing but a pack of young thieves, as can't leave their goods alone? Come, be off, all of you! When they

are gone to-morrow you can come and find some pickings on the beach, but till then clear off with yourselves !”

The young ones could not venture to disobey Master Castle, and retired to look on at a distance.

A dark pale man with lank hair, was sitting against one of the casks, looking very wretched and shaking with cold. He was a Spanish sailor who had been brought on shore.

“ I can’t make him understand, sir,” said Castle, “ but perhaps you can.”

Uncle Matthew, prompted by Alma, mustered up a little French and Italian, and all they could get from the man in answer to their enquiries was “ *Eccellenze ! Capitans ill—Speranza gone down—me ill,—freddo freddo !* ”

“ Hadn’t you better give that poor man something to eat, or to warm him ?” said Annette.

“ May I take him up to the house, and get some hot coffee ? Mrs. Baker will have some, I think.”

“ Well, it be a charity, Miss, for he sits there with his teeth all of a chatter, enough to drop out of his head ; it’s their way, poor furriners ?”

So Castle made signs to the man to go with the lady, pointing to his mouth, and pretending to eat.

“ Do come with me, dear,” said Annette, to

Alma, "it is so cold for you out here." But Alma preferred waiting for the return of the coast guard's boat.

Very late it was when at length, heavily laden, it toiled to the shore. Uncle Matthew and Alma pressed down to the water's edge.

"Is Mr. John there?"

"No, sir; he's still on board, helping out the cargo."

Uncle Matthew began to speak of going home, but Alma was in such a terror of alarm, and entreated to wait for him. He had frightened her so the night before by the wild things he said.

"Then you must tell him, Baker, that we are waiting for him here,—his sister and I,—and bring him back with you."

"Aye, aye, sir, I'll be sure."

When the boat was at length unladen, and again pushed into the sea, Uncle Matthew and Alma, with slow steps, proceeded up to the little black station house, where Mrs. Baker had prepared a meal. Long did they wait, twilight became darkness, and no tidings had yet come.

Alma had vainly tried to beguile the time with nursing Teddy's baby sister of eighteen months old, and many a time had she and Mrs. Baker opened the door, to listen for the sound of men's voices

on the beach. Uncle Matthew was talking with Castle and the other men, and sometimes looking after the sick Spanish sailor. The stars were peeping out above the cloudy mist, and a dulled sound from the distant rollers falling on the beach was all that she heard, when on a sudden Uncle Matthew opened the door, saying, "The boat is in, but he would not come back in her, he is following in a smaller one."

"He was terrible headstrong sir, and wouldn't go with us by no means," said Davies; "we saw the boat for a time following, but then we lost sight of her. Some of the men thought that he turned back, but I can't say."

"Was there anything likely to make him turn back?" asked Uncle Matthew.

"Well, you see sir, the tide was running strong and rapid, it was very awkward for a light boat, and only one pair of oars, and they may have run back to the other side of the Head, or down to the town."

"Possibly. Do you know the boat, or the man to whom it belonged?"

"No sir, I do not. He was a collier-looking fellow with a black face, and the name of the boat was rubbed out."

"We must try and find that boat."

There was a pause for consideration as to what should be done.

"You won't take Miss Alma back in the dark and cold to-night sir," said Mrs. Baker; "we will try and make her comfortable here."

He looked at her, and a piteous cry broke from Alma, "Do let me stay! O do!"

The foreign sailors were being brought into the kitchen, and there was a little confusion, when the quick step of a young man suddenly came to the open door, and as he was seen by the light inside, Alma exclaimed, "Oh! Mr. Lyon, *do* you know anything of John?"

"No." But Henry had been at Ivyton, and heard from Miss Wray all about the wreck; he had then come off partly to satisfy Mrs. Erle, who was alarmed at the idea of their coming home through the fog and darkness. Miss Wray would stay with her for the night.

"You will help us to find John, won't you?" cried Alma.

"If I can."

Presently a man returning from his watch on the top of the cliffs, brought a report that had reached the principal station, that there was still some one on the wreck. The boat without a name had been found on the beach; one man alone had been seen to get out of it.

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Davies ordered out the boat again to search the vessel, and the crew, wearied as they were, in a few minutes pulled out of the bay, with their signal light burning. Henry Lyon with them.

And now Uncle Matthew insisted upon Alma's taking some rest. He made her lie down on the little sofa Mrs. Davies had provided ; he sat beside her, he soothed her, and prayed with her, for the preservation of the life that might be in such danger, and that he might be spared to them to be brought into the right way.

Then, a little comforted, he left her, to speak to Castle and to help him and Mrs. Baker with the shipwrecked men.

The rattling of the lines against the flagstaff and the crying of a baby occasionally, were the only sounds Alma heard, besides that of the distant sea, for some hours. At length, as she was half falling into a light sleep, she became aware of a little stir in the house. She got up and opened the door. The boat had come back, but they had found nothing ;—the wreck had heeled over, and was lying in deep water. The men looked dispirited.

"Go in my dear," said Uncle Matthew, after a few minutes of consultation with Baker, "when they have had a little food a party will go out again. I will see that all is done."

"You had better not go, sir, surely," said Henry. But he answered decidedly, "Yes, I am going."

It was still far from sunrise on the winter morning, though the red of dawn was beginning to gleam faintly across the sea, as Alma and the women and children watched them down to the water's edge.

And after all, what had become of John?

His boatman had followed the coast guard crew for a little way; but he was a surly fellow, and began soon to say it was not possible to pull against such a tide, for they might very easily be swamped. John took an oar, but the two did not manage well together, and his inexperience very nearly upset the boat on the crest of a wave. The dark man seized both oars roughly, and turned the head of the boat round in the opposite direction.

"Hallo there! as you are going that way, I want to pick up something I left on board," said John. He had put down a field glass, he knew—somewhere.

The man pulled sullenly alongside, without speaking; the water was smoother there, and John easily climbed on board.

The black faced man watched him disappear down the gangway, then he took up his oar muttering, "Now my fine young chap! won't I pay you

out, and give you a fright,"—and rowed away, when the tide rapidly carried him out of sight.

When, after stumbling about in the darkness of the vessel, John felt he had better give up a fruitless search, and return to the deck, what was his surprise to find no boat waiting for him! He looked round in every direction, but could discover nothing; once he thought he saw a black speck dancing on the waves, towards which he shouted and whistled, and made beckoning gestures, but all to no avail.

"I suppose the ruffian will come back some time, he couldn't have made a mistake; or that cowardly coastguard will come and fetch me." So he carried on a succession of shouts and vociferations of no gentle character, in hopes of attracting the attention of any chance boat, or of being heard on the cliffs. But the cliffs were too high, and the wind carried the sound of his voice away before it reached the shore. At length he became perfectly frantic with rage, for it was evident that he had been abandoned, and was left to spend the night on board the vessel. The darkness increased every instant; he had no means of getting a light, or he would have put one up for a signal, but his thick coat, in which was a match box, he had flung over into the boat. In addition it was bitterly cold, and

the wind began to blow and whistle through the yards. He could not go below, for fear of missing any indications of a boat approaching. So up and down he tramped, thinking—"I'm precious hungry, and it's awfully cold;—and how can I pay out that fellow when I catch him?"

It seemed hours that he waited there; the tide was running in very strongly up channel, and the water began to gain on the vessel; having been lightened of most of her cargo, the stern began to lift, the waves were beating noisily against it, when suddenly with a lurch the vessel fell over, and the next moment he found himself in the waves. There was nothing for him to do but to strike out for the land, and he thought he should be in shallow water directly.

But here he was mistaken, for the current at that part being very rapid, swept him off in an eddy round a point to the eastward, and whirled him along. If John Sherbrook had not been a strong swimmer, he would never have reached the shore, but at length he found himself on the beach, breathless, exhausted, and bruised.

He sunk down just out of reach of the water, and could not have stirred till it roused him by coming up again to his feet. Then he aroused himself, with a vague sense of what he could do.

Had John been well acquainted with this part of the coast, he would have known that within a short distance of this point there were pathways up the cliffs, where he could at least have been safe from the sea. But as it was he turned the other way, with the intention of walking along the beach to the Gap. He had been hard at work all day, and had eaten nothing but a piece of ship's biscuit, and now he felt too weak to do anything but push on very slowly.

The sea now ran up very near. But he made his way along over a fall of chalk, and then as close as he could to the cliff. Many a stumble he had in the darkness; sometimes he slipped down a steep bank of shingle, or felt the cold foam running round his ankles, among the boulders, or the next few steps he was dashing against a chalk cliff; if he caught sight of a star through a rift in the clouds, he saw the pitiless walls towering above his head, too high, too straight for any hand or foot to scale them. The way seemed endless; "I must reach it at last," he thought, and the next moment he knocked his head against a barrier.

He felt his way along it, but was stopped by the water. A sound of sea all round him,—sea washing up to his kness,—foam and spray flung into his face, shingle and seaweed drift dashing all over

him, convinced him there was no path that way. He was fairly shut up in a trap!

Very narrow was the ridge of beach before he found what he now sought, and struggled up a few slippery steps to a narrow doorway cut in the cliff. There he sat down panting, and yet shivering with cold and exhaustion. Perhaps he might be heard from here, so again he shouted and whistled; but the wind and the sea again drowned the sound of his voice, only a few jackdaws and rooks rose up with, "Chack! chick-click! Caw-caw!" and then settled down again. It was all no use; he sat down with his hands on his knees, facing the sea, and very ugly it all looked.

He felt, more than saw, that the water was pressing on closer and closer; from time to time a gleam from the foamy crest of a wave showed him how near it all was, but in the darkness it was a great black mass tumbling and noisy, and already flinging jets of spray and beach into his face. The wind was keen and chilled him to the bone; and somewhere he had lost his cap. He scrambled back a little further into the cave, and lay down on a heap of old nets, which some fisherman must have placed there out of high water mark.

Then that same ugly story of the drowned Frenchmen came into his head. He tried to drive

it away; what was the good of thinking of that? but back it came again and again. What a roaring echo came into the cave, and how his head was throbbing and beating! Bang! bang! clang! clang! it was like the church bell at Ivyton. Was that why they called it the Parson's Cave? He laughed aloud at the idea, and then shuddered at the way his laugh echoed in the darkness.

Yet a vague sense of his own powerlessness was creeping over him, a feeling of some resistless Power he could not withstand; a vague sense not put into words by him—of Him who “weigheth the mountains in scales, and taketh up the isles as a very little thing.”

There that bell went, again and again, Ivyton church bell! and hadn't the old parson looked at him last time, and said some words that came sounding again with the bell, “*Why sayest thou—my way is hid from my God?*” Why did the old man look at him?

To be sure, he had made but a wretched thing of life; and he never thought he should have done that last thing. And if, he thought, it is all over with me before morning, there will be one less in the world,—and who would there be to care? None but one poor little girl, and perhaps that good fellow—

Then something like a sob burst from him, as he thought of that poor little thing, and how she would fret and cry, while he had cheated her out of every thing he could get.

The sea dashed in more strongly, the shingle and seaweed were dashed up against the mouth of the cavern,—his head went very giddy, and John Sherbrook fainted away.

Red and angry arose the winter dawn over a white foamy sea, but the coast guard boat had long been out toiling against the retreating tide. There was no hope of finding him at the wreck, it was rapidly being battered to pieces; but with the help of the men from the top, they would search below the cliffs, one party to the east, another to the west.

The party landed in a small cove near a large fall of chalk, round which the tide ran strong and swift. "Could he have climbed those cliffs, or have gone on the pathway?"

They shouted, and fired a gun more than once, but no one answered; only the jackdaws and rooks again rose up with with "Chick! chack! clik! Caw-caw!" and settled down again. Presently a dark object on the chalk struck Henry Lyon's quick eye, he picked it up, and holding it out to Mr. Erle said, "Is this his, sir?"

It was a Scotch bonnet, which Alma had made him two days before. "Ah! poor lad, it's his," said the Vicar, looking at it very tenderly, as he thought it might be all he should have to carry back to her.

They looked about for any further traces, and found none at that spot.

Davies stood considering, and at length said, "Then I take it he's come ashore after all, sir."

"Why, Davies?"

"So light a thing as that cap would have washed ashore further up eastward, if it had floated in by itself."

"There is no climbing possible this way."

"No, indeed; to look up at those cruel cliffs."

"There's the Parson's Cave to look in!"

They pressed on hurriedly along the shore, Henry and another man climbed up the steps, they called for a light, and after working through the heap of seaweed and drift that almost choked up the entrance,—there, lying on the nets, they found John Sherbrook, drenched with salt water and bruised with beach stones.

It was a rolling surfy sea that carried the boat back, and the men pulled on with rejoicing and spirit. Henry was using restoratives; and through

a moving and confused mass of rolling water and foam, and working oars, John awoke to the sound of the same voice he had heard in the cavern—"He's coming round a little, thank God!"

There were the arms of a man supporting him, and a pitying face bending over that handsome young head, so drenched, so faded from what it had been!

And over all was the Eternal Mercy, which has brought many a wrecked man to land.

Alma, with the women and children from the little black house, were waiting at the water's edge as the boat was seen against the dim winter morning sky; a faint cheer rose from the men, while there was one at least of that little group whose heart leapt with joy, as a waving hat and arm showed to Alma an encouraging signal from Henry Lyon.

"We'll put him into a warm bed, and give a hot drink of coffee, and then if you'll see him off to sleep, my little dear, I think he'll come all right again," said old Castle, affectionately patting Alma on the shoulder.

It was some hours after, when she was sitting watching John in a kind of sleep, that Uncle Matthew quietly beckoned the girl to come and speak with him. He had not been idle, for he

had been up to Ivyton and back, had told all to Aunt Letty, had sent messages hither and thither, one especially for the doctor, and made all preparations for taking John home in the afternoon. He looked sadly fagged, and the tears were in his eyes as he kissed Alma very tenderly, though he spoke cheerfully. Presently he said, "My dear, I want you to help me with a few words of French or Italian to speak to these men before they go; just to turn their thoughts to some better things than they probably have in their own minds. It will be good for us all."

Those shipwrecked sailors were standing idly about the waggons which had been packed with their cargo, waiting till all was finally ready to be taken to the nearest railway station. Then the old "*Padre*" beckoned to them with his hand, and collected them all in the little room, and in a very few words of French which they could all understand, told them he hoped before they separated they would join him in thanking God for their deliverance from the sea.

The men understood, and one took off a red cap from his head, and laying it on the table, raised his hands to a little gilt figure upon it.

Then the old *Padre* gently took the cap off the table, saying, "*Pardon! mon ami, pas a present.*"

And he held up his hand, and the Coast Guard all stood up, while the *Padre* read a few words from a paper given him by the young girl beside him ; then they and all the women and children knelt down all together, while the old *Padre* in a few very simple words of prayer, asked that with the lives given back to them that day, they might all show their thankfulness by being better men, and with His forgiveness for the past, live more and more as the servants of their Lord Jesus Christ.

Then from the little building arose the voices of men and women, joining in a song of thanksgiving as they sang,—

Saved from the perils of the tide and sea,
May those to whom Thy mercy has been shown,
In life and work, on land or ocean be
For ever Lord, Thine own !

The shores, the cliffs that guard our country round
By Thine own Hand were set, and Thine alone ;
The sea that thunders with a deafening sound,
Is ever Lord, Thine own !

The waters may be tost in angry strife,
The ships by fogs or tempest overthrown ;
Yet still, O Father ! Thou dost count each life
For ever Lord, Thine own !

O may Thy people serve and praise Thee Lord !
Until Thy Kingdom o'er the world be known,
Till deep to deep re-echoes with accord
For ever Lord, Thine own !

And as their voices ceased, the sound of the last wave falling on the beach died away along the cliffs, echoing

“For ever Lord ! Thine own.”

In a few minutes the waggons were started, the coastguard had given a cheer to the foreign sailors, and in half an hour one man alone was on the watch, and the Gap had returned to its usual quiet.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TIDE TURNS.

JOHN SHERBROOK was taken back to Ivyton ; he seemed heavy and dull, and in a few days he was very ill. No one knew all he had suffered that night in the cavern, and when Alma questioned him he could not bear to speak of it. Rest and quiet, care and kindness, seemed to do him no good ; at last he was obliged to give up entirely, and take to his bed.

All the Ivyton people were much concerned, not for the old Parson and his good lady alone, or for little miss, but also for the tall handsome young fellow who had been sauntering about the village with his care-for-nothing air only a few days back. If John Sherbrook had been the best of sons and the most affectionate of brothers, there could hardly have been more sympathy expressed by the village of Ivyton, for the poor young gentleman who was found half drowned in the Parson's Cave.

They were kindly simple-hearted people, and shewed their feeling in a variety of little attentions, both in expressions and in deeds ; so contrary to all their ideas was the fact that a fine strong young man should be laid up seriously ill. When Alma looked back upon it all, she felt quite astonished at the amount of affection that had been shown her, not by one or two, but universally, and for the sake of one whom they could not approve.

Miss Treherne's kind sympathy was certain ; and though Sir Richard at first wondered " why she should be so much interested in that good-for-nothing young scrapegrace," yet for the sake of his old friends and that nice little girl he allowed his daughter to have her own way, and in the end sent much valuable help. Uncle Matthew seemed endued with double powers, with strength of body, with strength of loving guardianship over her, and also with the irresistible charm of pitying, soothing forbearance to the sick man. How kind to him also was Aunt Letty ! All John's faults seemed put out of sight, and she nursed him and spoke of him with a tenderness quite unusual to herself. She was very clever in illness, and made many a wise suggestion which brought relief and comfort.

But perhaps Alma owed yet more to the dear

good Annette, with her unassuming assistance in nursing and her sisterly affection.

What an unspeakable comfort it was now to Alma, to feel that older heads and wiser judgment than her own took the control of every arrangement, every decision with regard to her brother ! and with a full sense of her own inexperience, she submitted to their guidance ; while with a child-like trust she dwelt upon every varying shade of expression on Uncle Matthew's kind face, as good or bad varied from day to day with John.

And he ! Did he heed, or even know the care, the watchful unwearied devotion that was lavished upon him ? Were the holy words, the prayers that were uttered round his bed, all unknown to him ? If he struggled back into life would he return to it exactly the same as before,—or would he pass away from them without a word of repentance ?

Uncle Matthew took great care of Alma ; he always would make a point of her getting some fresh air ; and when she was tired out with waiting upon John, she could find Crusty ready prepared to carry her out on the downs ; the baker was always willing to lend him for the nice young lady who had been so kind to his children at school, and the Parson might have him whenever the cart was not going on its rounds.

Meanwhile Aunt Letty never minded sitting with her work watching John. And as she plied her knitting, she would often repeat hymns in a low, sweet tone; sometimes they were suitable, and at others they were not, and whether he noticed them or not she never quite knew. One afternoon Alma crept noiselessly into the room; the cold, keen air of the downs had freshened her looks, and brought a rich colour into her cheeks. As she stood in the dimly-lighted room and listened, she heard Aunt Letty's voice,

Broken and helpless, lying at Thy feet,
Too feeble now to speak, too blind to see,
Without the power or wish Thy gaze to meet,
O Saviour! from Thy Cross, look down on me!

The past can never be undone again,
Nor from its dark remembrance set me free,
Yet for Thine own Love's sake, Thy dying pain,
O sinless Man, in mercy look on me!

I, who forgot Thee in the days gone by,
Who dared to think my ways Thou couldst not see,
Now supplicate Thee with my piteous cry,
O Saviour! cast one loving look on me!

Was it that he noticed the sweet low tone, or that he felt something of the words? that made John look with a face of entreaty, and put out his hand. Aunt Letty took it in hers, so worn, so thin as it was, saying,—“poor boy! poor fellow!” and as she raised it to her lips, the tears filled her eyes.

From that moment Alma felt that she loved Aunt Letty.

And so by degrees John Sherbrook struggled back into life. It was not a time of happy convalescence, although Alma tried to soothe and amuse him in every possible way, waiting upon him from morning till night; while Aunt Letty and Annette cheered him in addition to their excellent nursing. When he began to get about again he still continued silent and gloomy. The doctor said his head was still so weak that he must not be pressed with questions at present, so it was impossible to find out yet how he had reached the land. He found he had lost his watch, and could not account for it.

"When he is a little better," thought the old clergyman, "I must strive to make some more direct impression on him than is possible at present." So they continued to show him the utmost care and consideration, leading his mind as much as possible to thankfulness for his escape, and trying to encourage the hope of a better life.

"Ah!" thought Alma, "will he ever utter one expression of penitence, will he ever speak one word of gratitude? Will he ever know one-tenth part of all they have done for him?"

It was to Henry Lyon that John at length owed

something of this knowledge. The young man came over daily from his uncle's house to ask after the invalid, and felt, each time, fresh love and admiration for those who tended him, and who had shown him so much forbearance and devotion. But did they know how he had been throwing himself away in the past, how utterly unworthy he had been? or would they treat him with so much consideration if they did? Was it not allowing what was false and mean to leave them in ignorance?

So when the right time was come, Henry Lyon plainly told John what he thought of his former conduct, and what he considered was the only right course to take towards the friends to whom he owed so much. For gentle and kind as he was, Henry Lyon, with his upright and pure mind, could be just and stern in his sense of truth; so he told John unless he made a full confession he was acting a lie, and it ought to be the first step towards reparation of his conduct.

Alma knew that they had many long conversations together, when John was recovering strength enough to get into the open air; she thought Henry knew how her own money had been kept back, though he never referred to it.

John still continued very much depressed by his

illness; he was softened in his manner towards Mr. and Mrs. Erle, but still he had not spoken a word to break down the barrier between them.

All efforts to trace the man who had taken him to and from the schooner, seemed fruitless; there was first an idea that the boat had been upset, and that he must then have struggled to the shore; but as all that terrible night came back to his remembrance, the conviction grew upon him that he had been purposely abandoned, though for what reason he could not understand.

CHAPTER XXIII.

INSIDE THE OLD BOAT AGAIN.

It had been an unhealthy season, and about this time Alma received a note which little Esther had brought to her from Aunt Becca.

“ Dear Miss,

“ My poor little Teddy is too ill to go to school. And my father is very ill too, so that he is obliged to keep his bed. O ! dear miss Alma, do you think that kind gentleman, Mr. Erle, would come and see him, for he’s very bad, and I think he’s got something on his mind. Do you think you can do me this favour, dear miss, and ask the parson to come.

“ From your humble servant,

“ REBECCA SPRING.”

Alma carried the letter to Uncle Matthew, and made the request. Uncle Matthew said he would

go, though he was afraid he could not do much with old Spring.

"I hope you will be able, Uncle Matthew. I am sure poor Becca writes as if she wished it so very much ; and then we shall know more about Teddy."

"O yes, I will go, but I do not feel hopeful of any good."

"Becca is such a good girl," continued Alma, "and I'm very sorry for her. Annette says she is afraid the vessel in which the young man who wanted to marry her went to sea, has been lost, and that he may have been drowned. Master Castle thought so."

"Why did he think so, my dear?"

"Because of the name, it was the *Ben Cruachan* in which Jack Standfast sailed."

"Certainly there was the name of the *Ben Cruachan* among the missing vessels ; she was bound for the Baltic. If it is so, I am heartily sorry for Becca."

As he was leaving the house, Alma ran after him asking, "Please Uncle Matthew, can you take this picture book to poor little Teddy."

Mr. Erle made various visits to old Spring without much satisfaction. He was ill, and at times

grumbling and talkative, at others silent and surly. Becca looked dull and wretched, but she was always very respectful, and invariably asked after Mr. John. And little Teddy was always pleased to see the Parson come; he would climb confidently on the good man's knee, who would put his kind arms round the child, while he told Aunt Becca to keep him warm, and stroked his thin limbs and curly head. And Teddy always knew that something nice would come out of the Parson's pocket, either a picture book or a toy sent by Miss Alma, or something nice for his cough, or some little dainty to tempt him to eat. And sometimes Teddy would listen to a story or a hymn, and say it over again word for word, ready to repeat to Esther when she came from school.

Becca always looked enquiringly at Mr. Erle, as he came away from her father, and at length she one day followed him out of the cottage, to ask, "Has he said anything to you, sir?"

"Nothing particular, Becca; what do you mean?"

"I thought he would have told you something; perhaps he would—if he saw the young gentleman,—Mr. John, I mean."

"I don't understand, Becca; what could your father want to say to him?"

She hesitated.

"Don't you know, Becca, he has been very ill, and is only just beginning to get about a little."

"Yes, sir. Oh! I do hope I'm not doing wrong," said Becca, half crying, "but I want father to tell you himself, and I think he would if he saw Mr. John."

"Can't you tell me what you mean, my good girl?"

"O sir! he's my father,——I hardly can."

Mr. Erle was much perplexed, he supposed old Spring might be feeling some regret for having led John into poaching the winter before, but Becca's manner was so urgent, that he felt sure there was some good cause for her anxiety. It would not be an easy task to induce John to see old Spring; at length however, after much persuasion on Alma's part, one fine morning she saw Uncle Matthew, Henry Lyon, and John, drive away across the downs. Henry left them at the entrance to the green roadway, as he had an errand further on.

"Just tie up the horse, and come in with me for a few minutes." John, feeling very much like a criminal, was compelled to follow; yet he was quite at a loss as to what could be wanted.

Becca was on the look out for them; she took the two at once to her father, and said in a voice

that trembled with emotion, "Father! here is the young gentleman; you'll tell him *now*."

Old Spring turned his head; he was taken by surprise at the sudden apparition at his bedside, as John, pale and thin, his features all bearing the trace of recent illness, suddenly stood before him, coming from he did not know where. He muttered some remark about "Mr. John!"

Becca did not waste words or lose the opportunity, but taking something from under the pillow, and placing it in old Spring's trembling grasp, she said with much determination, "Father! you know you have something here to give to Mr. John," and guided his wavering hand towards the young man.

"It's yours sir, take it!" said the old man in a feeble voice, like one who had been beaten in a struggle, "I'll not keep it from you longer."

John stared stupidly; he could not understand it, but he put out his hand and received something at which he looked in astonishment, hardly trusting his own eyes; but there,—as he examined it closely, there was indeed actually his own watch; that watch which had been the object of such careful search, and about which he had in vain questioned his own memory. After gazing at it fixedly for above a minute, John said at length, "Yes, it certainly is my watch. Wherever did it come from?"

"A poor man picked it up on the beach," said Mrs. Spring in a whining tone.

Becca looked at her step-mother with indignation, and Mr. Erle with some suspicion, as he enquired "why the watch had never been restored, when everyone in the whole country round knew how it had been searched for by the coastguard day after day? When did he bring it, and who is he?"

Becca turned to her father with a tone of earnest entreaty; O father! do tell the gentleman all you know about it, for I think you know more than that."

"Spring!" said Mr. Erle, "you had better follow your daughter's advice, and tell all the truth, if you know more."

The old man paused, and at length said, "Well sir, it aint no use telling what's false, t'was Dick Bates as brought it here, the night the young gentleman was near lost."

"Dick Bates! what had he to do with it? How did he find it, and why then did not he bring it?"

"You see sir," put in Mrs. Spring, "he was afraid of getting into trouble if it came out he had got it."

The Vicar looked keenly at the old woman, enquiring what she could mean.

John's face had turned crimson and white by

turns, expressing a variety of changing emotions ; it was all clear to him now, and as if a curtain had been swept away, the remembrance came back to him clearly and vividly.

At length he broke out, " I know now, Dick Bates was that black-looking fellow who took me on board the wreck, and he left me there purposely."

" I'm sorry he did so bad by you sir," said old Spring, " but you see, he could never get over being turned out of his cottage, for that piece of work last winter."

" And he did the best he could sir," whined Mrs. Spring, " for he gave a lad a penny, and sent him to warn the coastguard that there was somebody on the wreck."

It was a glance of almost speechless indignation that the Vicar cast upon her ; at length exclaiming sternly, "*The best he could!* Is that the way in which a woman can speak of such an act of wicked treachery?" Then turning to the old man, he continued, " So Dick Bates brought the watch to you that night?"

" Yes sir."

" Tell me how he got it, for it is evident the story is not true that it was found on the beach."

Spring being pressed with questions, at length

confessed fully all he knew. Dick Bates had found the watch in the pocket of a coat which the young gentleman had thrown off into the boat when he climbed on board the schooner. Dick owed him a grudge, as he was turned off by Farmer Wray, for that piece of work last winter, and so he meant to frighten him, he didn't think worse than that.

"And are you aware, Spring," said Mr. Erle in a stern voice, "that this wicked treachery and cruelty very nearly cost the young man his life? How could he answer for that?"

Spring groaned, "I know, sir, I told him it was bad." He said besides he did not know where Dick Bates was,—in hiding somewhere he supposed. He allowed they had thought of selling the watch, but he couldn't, because of little Teddy, "for the little chap would go on a pestering me with questions about Mr. John's watch, and what I should do with it, and took on so that I couldn't do it. There sir, that's all I know," he said as he finished.

"Is this true, Becca?" said Mr. Erle, turning to her.

Poor girl! she was in bitter grief, full of shame and humiliation at her father's confession. "I believe so, sir, though I've never heard it right out all before; it's quite true about my Teddy."

Thinking he would rather talk to the old man

alone, Mr. Erle asked John to wait for him in the next room. Becca had made up a little bed for Teddy near the fire, to keep him as well sheltered as she could from the cold, and from the draughts that blew through the chinks of the tumble down cottage. The little fellow had seen them enter the room before, and now, roused up at their entrance, began between sleeping and waking, repeating, "Mr. John's watch! Mr John's watch!"

"It's all right, Teddy, go to sleep, dear!" said Aunt Becca, as she bent over him to soothe him.

"But has he given it him? has he given it him?" said the child eagerly.

Becca kissed him and smiled even through her tears, and then turning to John said, "I think sir, if you would be so kind as to show him the watch, that it would satisfy him better."

John took out the gold hunting watch, with its little dial plate, then opened it, and displayed its works to Teddy's delighted eyes; a flush of pleasure overspread the little boy's pale countenance, and then he turned his weary head to his pillow, with a smile of beauty and peace shedding a light over his face,

"How ever did he know it was mine?" asked John.

"You showed it him, sir, several times last

year, and he's never forgotten it. He said when first he found it as he was playing on Father's bed, that he was sure it was yours, and that is how I came to know anything about it; and he kept to it, though his grandmother gave him the stick for saying so," said Becca, looking very indignant.

"What a good plucky little fellow!" said John, who was naturally fond of children.

What a contrast was that true simple-minded child, sleeping in his peaceful beauty, with that pure innocent expression breathing from his still face, to the aged man in the chamber they had left. Only a thin partition between the two, and yet what worlds away they were!

A whole life time of long years of evil doing, closing with remorse, against the few happy, innocent days of childhood.

As John thought of the confession of revenge, treachery, and falsehood, and the meditated dishonesty which the old man avowed, the contrast struck him very forcibly and painfully. Yet these were the men he had made his associates, who had repaid him by a cruelty and hatred from which he had indeed escaped with his life, but the effects of which would be a lifelong remembrance. And then, too, John's own conscience,—that conscience

he had sinned against so often, had of late recalled to him many a remembrance from which he would have given anything to get away ; yet strange to say, the weight seemed only to increase in heaviness till it became almost unbearable.

And meanwhile through that thin partition came at times the sound of the old man's voice, in feeble, painful accents, 'like one telling a tale of many misdeeds, and then the tones of the old clergyman, warning, serious, yet elevating. Becca heard it, and thought it best to leave her father and the parson alone together. John Sherbrook heard it too, as he sat with great glassy eyes staring into the fire, and feeling that weight and burthen ever growing upon him more and more. Hadn't he been just as bad ? Were not there things that he would give anything to undo ? To cut off a limb and have done with it,—ah ! if he could exchange and do that, how gladly would he ! But even that would never undo anything, it would always remain there against him. That last thing of all too, which he had never thought himself capable of doing, repented of the moment after it was done, how it pursued him, till he writhed beneath the thought.

The old man was silent, and then there was a pause, until in the stillness of the cabin there fell on John Sherbrook's ear the sound of the same

voice that he had heard in the cave,—pleading, praying for the sick, terror-stricken, darkened soul; pleading for pardon, for light, for deliverance from the life-long burthen of sin and misery;—entreating the awful judge for mercy, and supplicating the sinless Son of God, the Man of Sorrows, of his own great Love to look down upon the poor, wretched, broken life lying before him.

John Sherbrook had never imagined the possibility of such a prayer, addressed to One so near, and yet so far off,—so awful, and yet so personally known,—the great Judge, yet the living Saviour and Friend! And while he listened, the words and voice had a strong power over him, unconsciously and unsought for meeting the gnawing pain in his own heart, and expressing something of its blank darkness and craving need. There he sat, with a fixed look, staring into the fire, until two large tears stood in his stony eyes, and a choking sob came sighing up from the depths of his remorse. He was aware of nothing more till a hand was laid on his shoulder, and the Vicar asked him to go and bring the horse.

Mr. Erle stayed only a few minutes to speak kindly to Becca. “My good girl, you have done quite right, hard as it must be for you, and your father after a time will probably feel so too, and,

be relieved at having told all he knows. Take courage, Becca! the worst I hope may be over; and take good care of that dear little boy."

Ah! did she need to be told to take care of her darling Teddy?

Then he bent over the child very tenderly, and kneeling down beside his crib, prayed for him and for Becca too, that she might be strengthened and comforted in her duty.

Then kindly taking leave of her he closed the door.

The wind blew keenly as they drove away; perhaps it was this that made John look as if he was shivering. "We will not go home over the down, though it is the shortest way, but take the lower road, as it is more sheltered," said Mr. Erle.

He wrapped John completely round, with the rug that had covered them both, saying, "You must not catch cold if we can help it, for that might do you much harm. I will get some straw to put about my knees at the next farm."

They drove on in silence, but John still looked as if he was shuddering with cold. At length Mr. Erle remarked, "I am glad you have recovered your watch, John;—by means of that good, honest daughter."

John's assent was scarcely audible.

"And I am thankful that so much has been cleared up that was a mystery before to me. That poor wretched old man expressed some real sorrow and misery for the cruel treachery of his associate, who did not care what became of you. As for Bates, he ought to be brought to punishment, if he could be found."

"There is no good in that," muttered John, "he won't be likely to do it again."

"Well,—perhaps it is better to turn to the thankfulness that his villany was not successful, and that your life has been spared to you."

"*My life!*" said John, with a bitter laugh, "what is the good of my life now? when it has lost every chance it had. It is worth little more than if I was that poor old wretch, and I could almost wish myself as near the end of it."

But the Vicar laid his hand on John's arm. "Young man! do not speak such rash words, and do not reject what has been mercifully restored to you. Do you think your life was not in danger when you might so easily have been lost on that wreck? Do you think it was not in danger when, with the most trifling shift of wind, you must certainly have been drowned in that cave; and indeed, after that, we could not be sure for weeks of your life. Rather turn with awe and thank-

fulness to the Almighty, who has given it you back, than allow of such thoughts."

He spoke solemnly, and his tone checked John for the moment, till he presently said gloomily, "That is all very well for others, but I have nothing left but to hate my life and hate everybody, and myself most of all!"

The words were spoken in a tone of such utter misery, that the good man did not allow them to repel him as much as they were intended to do. He answered very quietly, "I am quite sure John there is *one* whom you cannot hate, and that is the dear girl who has suffered so much about you."

There was a sort of choking in John's voice as he answered more quietly, "Poor little thing! she would have been better off without me!" Alas! it was only too true.

"And is it quite impossible that you should make her the better for having you? That is in your power entirely."

"Quite impossible sir," said John gloomily.

"I know you have lost much valuable time, of course; but if,—feeling the loss and folly of the past, you will endeavour to do something in a different spirit, and entirely give up some of your habits, there ought, at your age, to be hope of getting you into some way of earning a living."

As no answer came, he continued, after a pause, "John! your father and I were boys at our first school together, and had a good deal to do with each other; after that we were separated, my tastes led me to study, and his,—well, they were very different, so that we met but seldom. But when I heard of his death at the crossing of the Alma, I wished I could have done more for him, and now that I am an old man, if I could set his son going in the right direction, it would be a satisfaction to me."

John was somewhat moved at the mention of his father, and he spoke in a more softened tone than usual, "I know I have received kindness from you sir, to which I have no possible claim; but it is all no good, there is nothing for which I can ever make you any return."

"The best,—in fact, the *only* return I could wish for, would be to see you working for yourself in a right course, and that is the only thing which would make you more at peace with yourself than I know you are at present."

John seemed struggling with himself, and trying to stifle feelings and voices in his heart, in which shame, perplexity, anger at his own folly, were chiefly predominant. At length, when they were slowly driving up the Ivyton lane, he burst out,

"It's all worse than you think. I've done for myself and my work in life. If you knew all, you would see there was no hope."

Then he burst out into passionate, incoherent exclamations, about his own miserable luck, the wretchedness of his failure, all that had driven him from bad to worse, till he had lost what never could be regained.

Mr. Erle did not understand, and yet he hoped that the haven of repentance might be at work; and in much perplexity he said, "Without pressing you for a confidence you may not desire to give me, I must remind you, (as I did that wretched old man,) that there is but one right way to begin. To Him to whom all hearts are open, tell it all out,—from Him you can hide nothing,—ask His forgiveness for all, for our dear Lord's sake; ask it not once, nor twice, but again and again, till you can regain some peace of mind. No other way do I know. And as for what you may wish to tell me, I do not ask you to make known to me in a moment of excitement what you might afterwards wish unsaid, but I would gladly give you any counsel about the future that I could, with an earnest prayer that you may be spared to begin a better life."

Alma had been listening long for their return, but as she opened the parlour door, a sign from

Uncle Matthew kept her back. His arm was in John's, leading him into his study, where they remained a long time together. At length, after a long interval, she heard a very noiseless footstep passing up the stairs. She found John in his room, his face was hidden as he lay on his bed, but in answer to her enquiries if he felt ill, or if she could do anything for him, she at last made out the half audible words, "I don't know what possessed me to do it, but I told him everything; he knows it *all* now.

And that *all* was worse even than Mr. Erle had thought; for in addition to keeping Alma's money, and throwing away his own property in extravagance and gambling, John had, in a moment of temptation, altered the cheque for £10, which Lady Anstey had given him, to one for £20. How easy it had been, with one or two strokes of the pen, to do that which now tortured him with shame and remorse, and could never be undone!

And how he had defeated his own object, and wrought out his own punishment! From his own idleness and waste of himself he had thrown away his chance of an honourable profession; that was bad enough to be sure. But by this disgraceful act he cast away his character as an honest man,

he was no more fit to associate with gentlemen,—he had betrayed the confidence of the one rich person who might have assisted him in the distress his own extravagance had caused. “Yes, I know I am just as bad as those two wretched old cads!” he kept on repeating to himself. Oh! the misery of it all; how it had haunted him, until by a passionate impulse it had driven him to tell it all out in an altered tone, as he sat in the twilight in the Vicar’s study,—though the next moment he asked himself, what could give that old man such power over him!

He could not account for it; but the strangeness and intense earnestness of that prayer had something to do with it all, he believed. And then he fell into a sort of collapse of despair, hardly caring to think or to ask what would become of him.

Many a sleepless night, and much perplexity did this confession bring to the old clergyman, as he turned over the question again and again,—“*What can be done with him?*” Had John been only extravagant, he would have applied to the rich Lady Anstey, with a hope that she would assist the young man to emigrate. But of course his own misdeed had now made such a request impossible. Even if his health had been fully restored, it was quite impossible to recommend him

to any one, when he had shown himself so utterly unworthy of trust.

Upon one point, however, he quickly made up his mind ; *that money must be restored* at once to Lady Anstey ; while John remained under his roof, no such act of dishonesty could be passed over. Even if he paid it himself, such a slur must be removed from one so close to Alma. He told John, " If you really feel shame and sorrow for such an act, of course you must desire to make the only reparation you can, by repaying the money and acknowledging what you have done."

John knew this to be true, yet he also knew that his only means of repayment would be in parting with the sole thing he now possessed of any real value. He looked at his restored watch again and again, put it back into his pocket, and paced up and down in much agitation. It was the sole relic left him by his father, and the last thing he wished to part with,—but must that go to save him from utter dishonour ? After some miserable days and nights of struggle with himself, he could find no other way by which he was to repay Lady Anstey ; and with some agitation, he one morning put the watch into Mr. Erle's hands, with a request that he would dispose of it to a jeweller, in order to enable him to restore the money. Mr. Erle was

rather perplexed ; the watch was really worth more than the amount of the cheque ; but was this actually a step in endeavouring to return to a better course ? At length, after consulting with Alma, he replied, " I do not wish to sell the only possession you have left of your father's, which you might redeem at some future time." Then laying down a paper before John, he added, " If you will write a letter such as I require, and will leave your watch with me as a pledge of repayment at some future time, I will forward the money to Lady Anstey."

John felt compelled to submit ; Alma's well earned £3 contributed her share, and the rest of the sum was made up by Mr. Erle, with what had been paid him for some articles he had written for a magazine.

Lady Anstey did not answer John's letter ; but in a few lines addressed to the Rev. Matthew Erle, she expressed her displeasure with *that young man*, who had so disappointed and also defrauded her ; and ended by saying, she could never ask him to her house again. If he had made a proper request for money she might have attended to it, indeed she had always intended to make him a handsome present whenever he entered on a profession, but of course, under the circumstances, she must decline

having anything more to do with young Mr. Sherbrook.

This letter humiliated John very deeply ; he was aware he deserved it, yet he was very angry, and felt as if his expressions of contrition had been thrown away. But what else could he expect ? Ah ! did he yet feel the greatness of his sin, or was it only the consequences to which his mind was awake ?

This question Mr. Erle asked himself again and again, without being able to come to any satisfactory conclusion. But, as he said to Letty, " There are so many ways in which our Father teaches us, and perhaps the bitter after fruits may bring home the truth to a man's conscience, which has been blunted by many a misdeed. And unless he were thoroughly ashamed of a base action, (however much it were hidden in the dark from man) so as to acknowledge in his heart, " I have sinned,—I have sinned deeply against God and man," I should have little hope of any real amendment."

And this did the good man try, by direct or indirect ways, to bring before John, hoping that time would prove his repentance to be sincere. But the difficult question was still unsettled,—“ What, after all could be done with him ?”

CHAPTER XXIV.

FAREWELL.

ALMA was sitting in the little parlour, engaged in mending some old neckties, collars, waistcoats, and various other articles of John's wardrobe, to make them as neat as she could ; yet her eyes grew dim, and her hands trembled, as she could not forget it was in preparation for his leaving England. Henry Lyon stood near her ; he said, " I hope you are not very angry with me for what I have suggested."

" O no ! I know you think it the best thing for John."

He was rather pained by something in her manner, but presently added very gently, " I do really think it the best thing. There is nothing he can take to in England, and if he grows strong again on the voyage, as they say he ought, my uncle has friends in Australia and New Zealand who might put him into some way of making a living, if he will but work."

"It is so very far off," said Alma.

"Yes, but he may start better in a new country."

"I shall never hear from him, for he never writes," she said, half crying.

"Oh! perhaps he may," said Henry in an encouraging tone. "And how has he been spending the last three or four weeks, while I have been away? Has he shown any sign of taking to any work?"

"Uncle Matthew has induced him to do a little carpentering, and he has mended some boxes for Aunt Letty, and made old Molly a little table."

"Oh! that is well; it might come in usefully if he really will take to a settler's life."

Alma shook her head, as if she doubted his ever doing it.

"And how has he got the money for his passage?" asked Henry, with some hesitation.

"Oh! I was going to tell you about that, Mr. Lyon," said she, half blushing. "Uncle Matthew wrote to Lady Anstey when it was nearly settled, telling her all about John's illness, and also of this plan, and asked her for a little assistance for his outfit. It was so kind of him."

"It must have cost him a great deal to do that," remarked Henry. "And did it bring any answer?"

"Yes; Lady Anstey wrote very kindly, and sent

£100 to be applied to John's use, but it was to be kept in Uncle Matthew's hands. She also added a few lines to John himself, giving him very kind advice, and hoping he would try and begin upon a new life."

"And how did John take it; was he angry?"

"No, not at all. He was quite touched, and he wrote a very proper letter, expressing much more real sorrow, and thanking her for writing to him."

"I am glad to hear that."

"Everybody has been so kind, and he feels that too; even Sir Richard Treherne sent £30 to Uncle Matthew, saying it was to help to pay the doctor's bill; of course it was from his great respect for Uncle Matthew. But that does not make it easy,"—and then Alma's voice failed and she bent down over the necktie she was mending, pushing in her needle very hard.

"Oh! I don't wonder at your minding it so much, I am sure; my mother and my sister Katie feel parting with me just the same."

"I daresay; but then, when he is gone, I feel as if I should never hear from him. He hardly ever writes as it is, and we shall know nothing about him."

Henry Lyon felt very sorry for her; after a pause of a few minutes he said, "If there is any-

thing especially to tell about him, I will mention it in my letters to my mother, and she or Katie can write it to you. Shall I tell them?"

"O thank you! do please," said she.

"Stay! I will give you her direction, and then you can write yourself to enquire whenever you like."

He wrote down on a card, "Mrs. Lyon, Beach Cottage, Southampton," adding, "I am sure I wish I could do anything to make you more comfortable about him,"—for he was a very kind-hearted young fellow.

"I shall be all the more comfortable for knowing he is with you on the voyage, and I wish he was to remain with you altogether, but then you see ——"

Henry Lyon looked rather perplexed, his colour rose as he remarked, "You know I said *he must* depend upon himself; I really cannot answer for him."

"But you will do what you can for him, Mr. Lyon," she said in a tone of entreaty.

"What I can; but I am afraid that cannot be much unless he is determined to begin differently; unless for his own sake, and perhaps still more for yours, he alters his ways."

Alma looked distressed, and presently seeing the

tears stealing down her cheeks, he added, "I hope you do not think me hard upon him;—I really believe the very best thing for him would be to enter the Merchant service; I think the sea life and the regular work would do him good, but as it is, Captain Forbes takes me rather as a favour to my uncle, and I do not know whether he would take another."

"Or even if John would take to it himself," said she.

Henry had sat down beside her, and after he had once or twice taken up Alma's scissors and a reel or two of cotton, and laid them down again, he enquired where Mr. and Mrs. Erle were.

"Aunt Letty is just gone out to a cottage, she will be back directly, and Uncle Matthew is gone into the town with John to see after a tool-chest."

"I wished to say goodbye to them, they have been so kind to me."

"And you have done a very great deal for us. But when do you go?"

"Being counted an apprentice already, I am wanted at Southampton to-morrow, though the passengers do not go on board the *Dover Castle* before this day week."

"So soon! it seems to have come at last so quickly."

Here Aunt Letty entered, and the same information had to be repeated to her.

The *Dover Castle* was a large mercantile steamer, bound for various trading voyages, and carrying a small number of passengers to different places. Captain Forbes, who knew Henry Lyon and his relations well, was ready enough to receive him as an apprentice; his steadiness and reliable character would soon fit him for his position on board. But with John the case was more difficult; he was nearly a year older than Henry, and Captain Forbes did not fancy taking so old a learner; at the same time he would do all he could to assist John if his behaviour on the voyage was good.

"And you like the idea of a sea life," said Aunt Letty."

"Yes, very much for some things, as the other could not be had. Besides, I must do something; the worst of all is having nothing to do."

"How I wish John looked upon the question in the same way."

"Yes indeed," added Alma, "he is so restless, and seems to have no desire for anything but to get away from England."

"He does not wish to come in the way of his former friends, and I think when he is actually at some work, he will get on better."

"I do hope he may, please God!" said Aunt Letty devoutly.

Henry Lyon rose to take leave; his final grasp of her hand, and an earnest assurance, "I will do all the little I can for him, you may be sure," made Alma feel as he left the house that until that moment she had hardly realized what a true friend he was.

John left Ivyton with a sort of foreboding that he should never return to it again; he would not take leave of any one, not even of the Wrays. He fairly broke down at last, as he thanked Aunt Letty for all her kindness, and in parting with Alma he showed her more affection than he had ever done in his life.

Uncle Matthew went down with him to Southampton, to see him on board the ship, and to entrust his money to Captain Forbes.

As the *Dover Castle* slowly moved from her moorings, and a cheer arose from the shore for the departing emigrants, there was an old man following her course as far as he could on a narrow strip of sand, and watching two figures standing up in the rigging waving hats and arms as long as they could be distinguished. Deep and earnest prayer arose from that old man's heart, for the one

especially who had wandered so far astray ; but his last parting words to John had been those of encouragement and hope. The *Dover Castle* sped on her distant way, and he slowly turned his steps to the railway station, to wait for the return train.

When the Sunday services came round, Alma always knew at what passage especially Uncle Matthew was thinking of John.

CHAPTER XXV.

SUNSET ON THE DOWNS.

How beautiful are the sunsets seen from the downs ! Deep, soft shadows are sweeping over them, making them look large and grey, while their highest points seem rising up to meet the slow sailing clouds passing above them. A rich golden streak of light is spreading over the level country below, while the purple mist already softens the distant woodlands, and deepens the calm of the sleeping sea. And when the sun has entirely gone down, the gold and crimson glows on the edges of the clouds, and spreads a glory over the sky, changing and varying every instant, and yet telling hints of a glory which shall not pass away.

And Becca Spring stood watching it all, as she paced along the green roadway near the Old Boat, on that spring evening. There is a stile at the end

of the pathway to the farm below, where she had been to look for little Esther who was gone down to the village. "I wish my little maid would come in sight, I do not like her being so late," she thought, as she strained her eyes to see down the white road gleaming in the distance, but saw no one but an old man slowly mounting the hill. Then Becca turned again to watch the beauty of sea and sky, with the light sea breeze fanning her weary brows, and her features and form all brilliant in that golden glow. Becca stood with her hands folded on her bosom, for those hands once so full are now empty; all the care and the toil, the shame and the sorrow, the watching and the hoping, are all over, for in one week are taken from her the treasured child and his old grandfather, and to her is left the aching dreary void, and the silent chambers.

So Becca came out with slow and wearied steps from her stepmother's presence, to carry out some of the heavy load of her grief under the open sky, where at least she could have outward peace and purity. The glory, glowing and changing in the western sky, the high expanse of the heaven above, the deep purpling shadows on the over-hanging downs, all soothed and elevated the poor worn woman who crept out of the old cabin,—for Becca

too had been ill with grief and weariness. A little golden cloudlet, taking all manner of beautiful forms and rosy colours, was sailing along on the sea line, followed by a dark mass of cloudy rack, heavily labouring along the horizon.

Becca's eyes filled with tears, as she thought, "That little cloud is like my darling Teddy, as he went playing about before his grandfather, showing him such pure white innocence that it held him back many and many a time, and at last led him to do the only right thing he could ;—leading him—leading him on,—just as that little cloud leads the big one, the way God would have it go. And wasn't the only prayer poor Father ever learnt, one that Teddy had taught him? And didn't Father say he didn't care much after all to live, when his little boy was gone? only he hoped he should be forgiven, for he was sorry for all the bad he had done."

Then Becca thought of our Lord's kingdom, with all evil and wickedness cast out, and felt she knew something of a gleam from it, and could think of her Teddy as a thousand times more beautiful, and ten thousandfold more happy than he could be here; gone back to where his dear mother was. Ah! she must not grudge her darling to her good, kind sister Esther, as the Lord

had now been pleased to join them together ; she hoped they would all be joined together some day.

Becca's grief was very hushed and still ; but life seemed very bare and empty now ; she felt quite an old woman, as if she might be very near the end of it all. But was it to be His Will that she should lose all those she loved best, one by one ?—first, poor sister Esther,—then her darling Teddy,—then poor Father,—and—one more besides. She could bear it all, she thought, but for *one* thing.

The rosy glow was fading, and the purple mist and shadows were stealing over everything. She could hardly bear to allow that unspoken question even in her own heart, but it would rise unbidden.

“ Did he—did Jack,—when the ship was going down, and the boats were lost, did he think of *her* ; was her name on his lips, or was it that of another woman ? ” Ah ! that was a question no one could answer, she could never know. It was best to put that from her. Yet a thrill went through her as a something seemed to recall to her the sound of his voice, calling her by name, “ Becca ! ” Was it a voice sent to her from the deep sea ? Was the dead man allowed to answer her thought, to show that he had been faithful to her in the end ?

People did tell many stories about drowned

sailors, that she had heard when she was a child, but she had never believed them.

Life seemed very waste to her now, and anywhere in the world was the same to her; yet she felt she must get away from her old home, for her stepmother's ways were bad, and she did not feel bound to remain with her. If only she knew what to do with little Esther! Yes, the world was all much the same everywhere without him;—and again she started, for a sound was borne on a light breeze, as if a voice called her the second time, “Becca!”

There is many a superstition amongst seafaring people, and Becca was not wholly free from their influence; and she now turned cold and faint as she looked about to see if any well-known form stood near her in the deepening twilight. But no shape was to be seen,—only the tops of the bushes slightly swaying in the air. She stood still, and then moved on a few steps; she wished the little girl had come back, she must go once more to the stile to look for her;—and thus moving slowly along, at length the same sound came again more distinctly; “Becca!”—and there, when she reached the stile pathway, seen against the sky, there was a figure in a blue jersey, standing motionless on the other side of the stile, so like that one she knew,—was he a living man?

"Jack! Jack! is that you? Where do you come from?" she stammered out.

"I am just come home to-day, and I hadn't been an hour at home, before I came off to see you, Becca! I've been a long time on the road." There was a strange hoarse ring in his voice, and something made him seem different from the man she had seen standing there so many months ago.

Becca drew near with her hands clasped, and her heart beating. Was he indeed a living man? She gasped out, "They told me the ship had gone down, and your boat was lost!"

"They said right; for the *Ben Cruachan* did indeed go down, and my boat was swamped, and three men were drowned, but I was picked up by a Swedish vessel, with my limbs broken, and then I lay in a fisherman's cabin for weeks, thinking I was never to get away any more in this life, for I seemed like enough to die;—but here I am again, Becca, as soon as I heard how you'd lost your father, and that poor little chap, and were so cut up."

Becca's hands were still clasped, and she murmured "Thank God," but the tears began to steal down her cheeks as she added "Oh Jack! I have suffered terrible, and never a word from you."

"I know Becca, and I used you cruel bad, but I thought you might overlook it now."

"One word would have been enough, but you never gave a sign,—and people did begin to talk ———"

"And they said what was false," burst out Jack with something of his old vehemence, "and when they began to say I should marry Bess, they drove me well nigh mad ; so I thought I'd best take myself clean off and a pretty mess I made of it. I know t'was bad to leave you that way, Becca, and when I lay, not able to stir in the fisher's hut, the worst misery was when it came to me over and over again like an old song, ' Here you be you fool ! and all your own doing ! when there's a woman at home that loves you, and the worst fault you could ever find with her was that she was too faithful to what she thought was right.' But now Becca, if you'll forgive me, I'll try and be good to ye."

"Oh Jack ! I do forgive you with all my heart," said she in a changed voice, from which all anger was gone, but yet she did not stir or draw nearer to him.

"And you belong to me now,—you'll come now Becca, and be my wife !" and Jack stretched out his arms towards her.

The child Esther was climbing up the path behind him, heavily laden with a basket. Rebecca

pointed her out to him and said, "See yon poor little maid! I couldn't leave her behind."

"Then you may bring little Esther if you like; Aunt Hyde will be glad of her. But you'll come,—you'll come Becca, now won't you," said he entreatingly, leaning over the stile towards her.

Then Becca unfolded her arms, and threw them round Jack's neck, and kissed his pale forehead, and whispered, "God bless you Jack! I will."

Two days after, Aunt Becca and little Esther came down the pathway from the stile, to stay with Aunt Hyde on the sea shore. Becca got well in nursing Jack, and before the summer was over they were married very quietly, and began their life together with thankful hearts. Becca's sorrows and trials all made her outwardly very quiet and grave; but Jack kept his word; he was a good and devoted husband, and a boatman whom every one respected.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ANSWERS.

ALL this time, unknown to Alma, Miss Treherne had been forming plans for her benefit. Two young cousins whose parents had to return to India were left in the charge of their German nurse, and under her superintendence.

They could not be received at Hurst Manor during the summer time, as although the house was roomy it was usually filled with guests, so after some consideration it was decided that they should be placed in the quiet lodgings at the Strawberry Gardens. The German nurse was a good trustworthy woman, but she did not profess to be able to teach two lively, volatile children of four and five, just fresh from Indian Ayahs, and their mismanagement. The thought then occurred to Miss Treherne, whether Alma could spare the

time to undertake the training and teaching of these two little girls for three mornings in the week. Although only a small salary could be given, she would feel she was gaining something ; and that her friend well knew was, under the circumstances, an object of great importance. When, however, the request was made, Alma rather hesitated, and with a heightened colour remarked, " I must ask Uncle Matthew." " O, quite right ! my dear ;" said Miss Treherne, with a smile and a nod.

Two years have now come round since the day Alma had first entered Ivyton Vicarage, and now the question Uncle Matthew had kept so long out of sight must be asked her again. What would she say ? She was more dear to him than he could tell, and all the painful circumstances of the last few months had bound them together more closely still. But would she wish it ? " Ah well !" said he with a sigh, and then he turned to the abtruse book that he was studying for the subject on which he was to write for the next month's periodical.

But before he was settled, Alma opened the door, and asked rather timidly, " Might I speak to you, Uncle Matthew, before you begin ?" She saw him start and his hand trembled, so that he

dropped the pen, and made a large blot on the paper. It was an unusual thing for Uncle Matthew to do, and after the blotting paper had been provided he said in a nervous tone, "Well, my dear,—what is it?"

With some hesitation she at length made her enquiry plain to him.

"*Oh!*" said Uncle Matthew, in a doubtful tone, "was that all? And what did you say to Miss Treherne?"

"I told her I must consult you and Aunt Letty."

"And what do you say for your own wish, Alma?"

She answered, blushing, "I think I should like to do something to earn for myself, and not feel,"—and then she stopped.

"Well, my dear, not feel what?" said he, trying to help her out.

"Not feel that I was living upon you and Aunt Letty."

"Then," said he sadly, "Do you mean you wish to leave us? Is that what you and Miss Treherne meant?"

"It would only be for three mornings in a week; I could do things at home just as well I think."

"If Aunt Letty has no objection, then I suppose you had better go."

It looked to him so like a preparation for her going away altogether, that he spoke in a depressed tone.

"If you don't wish it, Uncle Matthew, that would answer Miss Treherne at once," said the girl.

He closed his book, and then rising, paced slowly up and down the little study. "There was a question, Alma, we left unsettled a year ago, which perhaps we had better reconsider. Of course it is quite right you should wish to make a beginning of doing something for yourself, and I cannot make any provision for you, sad to say ; if you wished to seek another home you might no doubt gain more money than you can in this poor little place, but, —" and then he stopped,—the loss to himself would be too great for him to speak perhaps fairly,—so he simply said, "the question is, do you still wish to leave us?"

Then it all came over Alma with a vehement rush of feeling, as she exclaimed, "Oh ! Uncle Matthew, please don't ask me that. You who have done so much for me and poor John, and who have been so good to us both, as nobody else ever could or would be, and Aunt Letty so kind to him too,—oh ! I've been so sorry, so very sorry, I ever said that ; only if you will let me stay, and forget that, —and not send me away—"

"There! there! my good child," said he, half playfully, but with tears in his voice, "God forbid I should ever send you away my Alma, and I trust that we may yet see the other come back home in a different way."

Then he turned to discuss quietly the question of Miss Treherne's arrangement, and how it could be managed.

Alma's heart was very full, and before she left the study she spoke out, "I know I have made many mistakes, and have been troublesome to you and Aunt Letty, but I hope I have learnt something, and that I am not ungrateful, for indeed I do feel how good, how very good you have both been to me, and in all this terrible time too, in which I could have done nothing without you."

"My poor child it *was* indeed hard on you, but I have always only longed to help you, as if you were my own daughter."

"I know, I know,— but I have disappointed myself so often, and made so many mistakes."

"So we all do my dear," said he gravely, "and we have often to learn by our failures. But what sort of mistakes?"

"Oh! I began with wanting to do so much good, and I have done so little; and to get people to be better and happier, and yet I haven't made

them so, and everybody else seems able to do it so much more; not only Miss Treherne, of course,—but Annette with her hands so full, and yet helping everybody in trouble,—and good faithful Becca too, and even poor little Teddy!”

“Ah! dear, true little boy! He always made me think when he was with that old man of the words, ‘And a little child shall lead them,’ the emblem of our Lord’s Kingdom checking and holding back evil by innocence.”

He did but sail a little way
Adown the stream of time,—
Full short his journey was, no dust
Of earth unto his sandals clave;
The weary weight, that old men must,
He bore not to the grave.
He seemed a cherub who had lost his way
And wandered hither, so his stay
With us was short * * *

“But Becca was so good and brave through her many troubles, because she steadfastly worked through her difficult duties just as a matter of course. I am sure she deserves the name of ‘Standfast,’ and I hope she will be very happy in it. But you my dear have your own trials, which an old man could have wished to shield you from, and to spare you; but as that could not be, he says, ‘Take courage! look up my darling, and commit thy way unto the Lord, and He shall bring it to pass.’”

Aunt Letty made no objection, being really pleased that Alma should do something for herself, so the question was very soon settled, and through the spring and summer and autumn mornings, from April till November, she went regularly to the two little girls.

Daisy and Rose Elliotson were two lively children, quite untrained, and as mischievous as monkeys. It was very hard to get any sort of attention from them at first, their lithe slender limbs would wriggle away through the doors, or under tables and chairs, when she thought they were safe in the room; and then Mrs. Gray would pity poor Miss Alma, who had to chase them through the raspberry and gooseberry bushes, till Rosie was captured with a scratched nose, and Daisy was crying out for a lost shoe; or if for a time Daisy's eyes were fixed upon a book, Rosie's quick fingers had seized on Alma's hat, and pinned it to the back of her dress, whilst mischievously looking on with laughing eyes, to see a hunt for it. But when the little tormenters found that Alma took it all in good part, and laughed with them at their own pranks, they became very good friends, and after awhile grew obedient and teachable. It was all very good for Alma in the end, for while her attention was taken up with

training the little ones, and while she amused Aunt Letty in the evenings with funny stories of the children after her mornings spent with them, her thoughts were less painfully absorbed than they must otherwise have been. Besides, between the drawings, for which Miss Treherne always managed to find a purchaser, and her work in teaching, Alma was enabled to gain a small sum which added its contribution to Aunt Letty's household expenditure, and this was a satisfaction on both sides.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

RETURN.

News of the *Dover Castle* came in from time to time, and Katie Lyon forwarded to Alma any tidings of her brother. After the novelty of the first week was over, John had become very restless and wearied ; the idleness of the voyage was becoming a temptation to him ; his old habits seemed returning as far as possible under the circumstances. In the course of some rough weather, two of the crew were disabled by accidents, and the vessel being thus short handed, John volunteered to supply the place of one of them. He had began his new life as carpenter's mate, and would soon make himself useful, if he would but be strictly obedient to orders.

Alma was greatly shocked when she heard this, but Uncle Matthew comforted her by saying he thought it might on the whole be one of the best things John could do ; nothing could be worse for

him, or more of a temptation, than total idleness. Not a word was heard from John himself for many months; at length a few lines reached Alma, referring to his having chosen a sea life, until he met with anything better; and with this she was obliged to be satisfied.

So months wore on, and between her various occupations Alma's hands were very full; the frets and jars that had so disturbed her relations with Aunt Letty, were partially removed by her temporary absence; her painting soothed her mind, and was an unfailing interest. Aunt Letty also felt more respect for a young person who could both make herself useful at home, and also earn something independently for herself.

Those months spent at peaceful little Ivyton were very quiet indeed; like a calm after past storms.

One warm summer evening Alma's busy fingers had been employed in repairing Aunt Letty's old dress, "to make me look fit for Sunday, my dear." Uncle Matthew had been reading aloud till the dusk had made him grow sleepy, and the volume had noiselessly slipped from his hands, while his wife began also to nod quietly over her knitting. Alma's work was ending, and her thoughts were

far away, when all on a sudden, a shadow crossed the window; she felt, rather than saw, some one was there; she crept out of the room without disturbing the old people, and opening the house door, Henry Lyon stood before her. She shook hands with him and asked, "Is John there? we heard the *Dover Castle* was expected."

"No, he could not come with me, he asked me to tell you so."

"O dear! how is that?" she exclaimed in a very disappointed tone, "is he well? and why couldn't he come? why didn't they let him? I am afraid he must be ill."

"O no! he is very well, but there was a great deal to do on board, and he had to remain for it."

Alma looked grievously disappointed and almost ready to cry;—then the thought occurred to her she had better ask Henry Lyon to come in, and she went to call Uncle Matthew.

The ship had met with a good deal of damage in the Channel, in the way of broken bowsprit and lost bulwarks, and John had to see to the repairs; the shipwrights were at work all day, as the vessel was to be hurried off again as soon as possible.

"That looks like doing work," said Uncle Matthew, "but I wish he could have come with you."

"Oh! they *must* let him come," said Alma, hopefully.

"I fear not," he said, gravely.

Alma then realized for the first time that John was in a position to be detained; her hopes and expectations were quite dashed to the ground, and she hurried away on the excuse of bringing in a light, and still more to check the unwelcome tears. She almost felt inclined to blame Henry Lyon for coming without him.

On her return she heard him say, "I thought I would call in on my way to my Uncle's, and tell you about John; (there will be a dog-cart coming for me in half an hour.) He seems strong, and I think he likes his work."

"Didn't he send me any message? He must have been so terribly disappointed, poor John. Do you really mean he won't come at all?" she again asked, eagerly.

"I am afraid I cannot give you any hopes," said Henry Lyon, looking down as if to avoid her eye. "Of course he was very sorry."

"But what have you done to your own arm, Henry?" asked Mr. Erle, as they perceived by the full light he had his arm in a sling.

"Oh! it got hurt by an accident."

"Was that by the storm?" asked Alma.

"No; it was an accident."

"Is it badly hurt?" said Aunt Letty, who had come.

"Well,—rather;" he said, shortly.

Old Nancy and Alma brought in the tea, and as they sat in the little dining room, he told them a little more about John. He had taken to his work very well, he was getting into training as a seaman, he was very active and daring, though often sadly thoughtless, and not as ready to obey orders as he ought to be. It was all his own doing becoming a sailor, and Henry thought it was on the whole better for him than a settler's life; the being under strict orders, instead of being his own master was no bad thing.

Alma felt her cheeks burn, as she wondered in her own mind how John would like that!

Then the young man talked with Uncle Matthew about the various countries and sights they had seen. Oh! how pleasant it would all have been, if only poor Johnny had been there. There was a well known, honest face opposite her, though he did indeed look rather pale, and Aunt Letty said kindly she did not think he looked strong enough to be a sailor,—but she could not put away from herself the constant feeling, "here is the officer

and my poor John is now his inferior." The very idea kept her, after the first, silent and distant.

Henry Lyon told Mr. Erle he wished to speak to Alma alone for a moment, when, taking from his pocket a letter, he said, "John wished me to give you this when I saw you."

"A letter! why didn't you give it me before? I think you might;" said Alma, flushing almost angrily.

"He told me I had better see you first," said Henry, very quietly.

She tore it open, with trembling fingers, and sat down to read it, exclaiming presently; "oh! what *has* he done? I can't make it out."

"May I look?" said he, drawing the sheet from her hands, "I think he meant me to see it."

It was a letter of bitter self accusation, of which she could comprehend but little except one sentence, that he had nearly done for the good fellow who had dragged him through one scrape after another,—it was a lesson for all his life,—but her brother had disgraced himself for ever.

"He was indeed grievously sorry, and most wretched," said Henry, "and I trust he will never do the same thing again."

And then he explained the letter. The fancy had taken John to make a number of fireworks;

of course it was a most dangerous experiment, and totally against all rules. When they were discovered, it was Henry's business to see that these fireworks were thrown overboard. Instead of submitting quietly to the order, John passionately resisted, and a struggle ensued, in the course of which some of the fireworks exploded, and Henry's arm was severely burnt.

The accident had the effect of bringing the young man to his senses, and in bitter self reproach and misery did the carpenter's mate, in consequence, spend the time during which his friend's life was in danger. At length, by means of Henry's interceding for him, he was restored to his former position, though not allowed to leave the vessel; but whether he would remain with Captain Forbes it was impossible to say.

The grief and horror at hearing this story, the blow to all her hopes of his amendment, such an end to the suspense of the last two years, quite overcame poor Alma; she bent down her head, and could not restrain her sobs. Henry Lyon was pained to see her, though he hardly knew how to comfort her; at length he said kindly, "O pray don't Alma! it is a good thing it wasn't worse, for he might have killed us both very easily."

"Oh! I'm so sorry, and that he should have done you so much mischief."

"That cannot be helped; of course it was a pure accident. And I never saw poor old John so shocked and distressed. He was really quite cut up, and I think his letter shows that. It was not such a bad thing in itself, only so awfully dangerous, and of course the disobeying orders could not be allowed. See, here is another paper you have dropped."

There was written inside a blank cover, "This is some of the money that ought to have been yours long ago. I have no right to it, and shall not want it."

A £5 note was enclosed.

"Oh! but he will want it," cried Alma, "I shall return it to him."

"No, indeed you *must* not," said Henry, almost in a tone of authority, "he does not want it on board ship, and he is grown aware that one of his greatest temptations is to spend money when he can. This is the last he has drawn from Captain Forbes, and he charged me to give it you. 'A fool and his money are soon parted,' was his remark. You know the mocking tone in which he says such things."

Alma did not like keeping the money, but Henry

assured her he thought it the only right thing to be done. He did not tell Alma till some time after, that his hand was so severely injured, that his chance of a sea life must be given up, which was another bitter disappointment.

When Uncle Matthew had heard all, he shook his head very gravely ; but at the same time he told Alma that the returning the money was the most hopeful thing he had heard of John.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOPE DEFERRED.

STORM and gloom have again hung over the Downs, and quiet little Ivyton has been often wrapped in mists and snows ; and then again the wind has blown aside the clouds, and the larks spring up in the sunshine, and the sheep and lambs crop eagerly the short thymy turf, while the shepherd and his dog follow, or direct their track. So the seasons come round, and in quiet little out-of-the-way places there is little visible change to strike the eye, and in quiet unmarked lives the years creep on without leaving much trace, and unrecorded work is done in a little corner of the world, without visible effect. But yet, here and there and everywhere it is all telling upon the general whole, and adding to the life history of a nation.

And before they thought of it, the old Vicar of Ivyton and his wife have grown four years older, and move about the parish a little more slowly ;

and eight years have passed since Alma first came to them. And she is become more dear to him than ever, and the orphan girl with whom he took such pains is now growing into a cultivated young woman, entering into his tastes, and helping to copy out his manuscripts, and conversing with interest about the subjects upon which he is writing.

And to his wife she is so useful, both in the house and in the parish, that Aunt Letty actually takes pleasure in talking of Alma as her "right hand," and wonders what she ever could have done without her. The old people too have been able to allow themselves a few more comforts, since the time when, after consulting with his daughter, Sir Richard Treherne has made a small addition to the living of Ivyton. Old Nancy has a younger servant to help her in the house, and does not lament so much over the scanty fare to which her poor master and mistress are limited.

Alma's life is very busy, and in a variety of occupations she has exercise for her various powers of mind; and in gaining the affection of the children she teaches, and in the ever growing love of her old friends, she has many sources of true happiness. Miss Treherne often seeks her companionship, and many a pleasant hour is spent at Hurst Manor, either copying its beautiful pictures, or painting in

the delightful garden or park, and on the upland downs, with the rich woods spread out at their feet.

But there is one dark cloud still casting its shadows over Alma's life; not passing away as the clouds do on June days from the down, and leaving no trace behind, but always like a mist ready to dim everything. For these four years no tidings of her brother have reached her.

After the crew of the *Dover Castle* were discharged, it was supposed that he had engaged himself on board another vessel, but all efforts to find him proved fruitless. For a year or more his silence had caused Alma no surprise; it was his way,—a letter might come any day, or he himself might appear at any time. Sailors often were long away, she knew, but as the months passed on, and the name of "*John Sherbrook*" was unknown at the Shipping Offices, and letters were returned from the *Dead Letter Office*, she became seriously uneasy. Uncle Matthew too, looked very grave when they spoke of John, for he could not put away the thought how many ships went down, and how many sailors were drowned, and how large was the list under the head of "*Missing*," of whom nothing more was ever heard. Still he kept up her hopes as best he might, whilst making enquiries in all directions.

And yet Alma's heart sank very low, and many a secret reproach did she give to herself "for having consented to keep poor John's last money!"

Perhaps it was, after all, Henry Lyon who kept up the gleam of hope in her heart more than any one else; for though she could not account for it, the two young men seemed so linked together in her mind, that it seemed impossible that so long as Henry Lyon came to visit them occasionally, the other should be entirely lost. His arm had been too much injured for him to return to a sea life, and after some time spent in vain attempts to get any suitable employment, he had decided to learn farming, and had been studying for the last year under Mr. Wray. The Sunday evenings were not unfrequently spent at Ivyton Vicarage. What a comfort his presence was to them all!

"Do come with me, dear, to-day," said Annette Wray, "I must go down to the town, and you can pay Becca a visit while I do my shopping. You are not going to the children to-day, and you look tired and pale; you have been working too hard lately."

Alma laughed at the notion, but still she was persuaded to come; it was always such a pleasure to see Becca.

Such a lovely June day as it was! The rich sunlight bathing the downs, up which the afternoon shadows were beginning to slant, and the flock to creep towards the top, as they drove down the Ivyton Lane. And down below, meadows and pastures, and waving cornfields and distant woodland, with moving windmills turning on the slopes, spread out in warm sunny brightness, to melt away in the distant sea.

A sunburnt young man on a stout pony trotted by, but stopped in answer to Annette's call. "Have you seen my father? Is he coming with us?"

"No, he is gone down to the wheat fields, and has sent me with a message to the farm," and then he nodded to Alma, and rode on.

"Don't you think Mr. Lyon looks much better since he took to farming regularly?"

"Oh yes," said Alma, "our fine down air seems to have done wonders for him; and he likes the work now."

"Well, I hope he does. Father says he takes to it very nicely, and never minds how hard he works. And he is so pleasant in the house too; I used to think I should dislike having a young gentleman pupil in the house, but he never puts himself out in anything, and takes it all so kindly.

Our children think so much of him ; there's nobody like Mr. Lyon with them," she said, laughing.

"I daresay ;" and then Alma sighed, as she wished somebody else had been like him.

"I haven't seen you for some days, but I meant to tell you that we have heard again from Lydia."

"Have you really ?" said Alma, rousing herself, "and what did she say, and where did she write from ?"

"From America, as she did two years ago, and our letters had only just reached her, for her husband had taken her to San Francisco."

"And what did she tell you, Annette ?"

"I gather that she leads a very unhappy kind of life, poor girl ; she says she has bitterly repented her marriage, and longs that she was back again at the Farm, with all its dulness. Her only comfort seemed to be in our letters, and especially in one that Mr. Erle wrote her."

"O yes, I know Uncle Matthew wrote her a beautiful letter."

"She had been ill too, and the children also, and she longed for Mother and me to nurse her, poor girl ! They seem badly off, and whether they mean ever to come home, I dont know. But it has taken a long time to find her."

Yes, indeed! it takes a long time to find any one who is really lost, as Alma knew only too well.

Becca's little home looked bright and happy, very unlike what the Old Boat had been. Aunt Hyde gave her many a useful hint in house-keeping, which Becca was only too glad to have.

She was so pleased to show everything to her young ladies, and to say how good and kind Jack was, and how fond he was of his child. "They said he was a little disappointed she was a girl; but I don't know, miss, I think after all, men are just as fond of girls, and I hardly wished for a boy, with thinking of my darling Teddy."

And then she made her little Susie toddle to the door to see if Father was coming, and clap her hands and call for the boat, and go through her little store of accomplishments. Becca was quite talkative, and told Alma how old Master Castle popped in now and then to see them, and "I tell him he spends all his time in playing with the child; he is so fond of her."

"What a long way for him to come," said Alma.

"Yes, it is, miss; but it is only on days when he has a little leisure; and then he comes to have a little chat, and sometimes will stay for a cup of

tea, for he knows Jack and I both like to see him."

Alma enquired after little Esther, who was growing into a nice handy girl, having just left school, only not quite big enough for a place. "Her Uncle Jack says I must keep her for company at home while he's away."

It was a pleasure to see Becca's happy contented face, and for Alma to carry back such a picture of the young fisherman's home. "And is Jack out with the boat?" she asked.

"He is out with his partner and the nets now, and early this morning he was out shrimping."

And then Becca looking in Jack's basket exclaimed, "Oh! here are a few fine ones left, do take them back with you Miss Alma, for I know Nancy said the parson was very fond of shrimps, and that you didn't get many up there,"

"Oh! thank you, Becca, they are beautiful ones, if you will let me have just a few."

"And did you hear, Miss Alma, of the misfortune my poor Jack had? at least, it was a mercy it was no worse."

"What do you mean, Becca? I've not heard of any misfortune."

"It's all right, I'm thankful to say; but when he and some of the boats had gone down to the

Isle of Wight, they just came in for a regatta. It was a beautiful sight Jack says, for he saw it all from the little boat, as he had just been ashore,—the yachts came down sailing so grand, but—O dear me! it makes me shudder now,—before you knew it, there was one ran him down, and my poor Jack was in the water!”

“Oh Becca! what happened then?”

“You know, Miss Alma, so many of our men can't swim, and a sad pity it is. Jack can swim a little, but he seemed like going down, when a big man jumped overboard from a gunboat that was lying near, and caught him just as he was sinking. Then they took him on board the gunboat, and brought him round, and gave him a good breakfast before they put him ashore, and were wonderful kind to him. And they seem to have taken quite a fancy to my husband, for when Jack had told them his name and where he came from, and how he should have been sorry to be drowned, for he had a wife and child, and a good home, and thanked the big sailor for saving him, the poor fellow shook him by the hand, and said he was so pleased to have saved him. And he quite cried, and said he wished he was going home too. Jack said he should dearly like me to see that man, ('Big Jack,' the others called him) and

to thank him, and indeed I should. But oh ! Miss Alma, what dangers our poor men have to go through, and how thankful I ought to be that I have my Jack all safe ! ”

Poor Alma ! every sailor story seemed now to touch her to the quick, and her head bent over Becca's child to hide her tears. When Annette returned she found Becca kneeling beside her, and saying in a soothing tone, “ you see, dear miss, my Jack was long away, and I didn't know what had become of him ; but the Lord has been very good to me, and I hope you may some time be able to say the same too.”

Yet that story of “ Big Jack ” seemed to have taken hold of Alma's sleeping or waking thoughts, by day or by night, though she could not have told why.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. ARMSTRONG.

MISS TREHERNE had come early one morning to see her little cousins at the Strawberry Gardens, and was now awaiting Alma's arrival. Rosie was leaning against Cousin Ella's knee, and little Daisy was sitting on a low stool nursing her doll, when the door opened, and instead of Alma Mr. Erle walked in.

"I am afraid the little girls must do without Alma to-day, for she has so bad a headache that I persuaded her not to come."

"Oh! I am so sorry to miss her," said Miss Treherne, "but how kind of you to come through this hot sun to tell me; now do sit down and rest a little, you look tired out. I hope there is not much the matter with Alma."

"Not much I think; only it is hope deferred," he said, rather sadly.

"O yes, that must be a trial indeed; I often think she bears it very bravely." And then came a pause.

"Cousin Ella," whispered Rosie, "won't you now go on with Mama's letter."

"Do, please!" exclaimed Daisy.

"I was reading the children a letter their mother has written to me, about her being saved from a burning vessel, with her little boy. It really is so interesting an account that I think you will like to hear it. She begins with saying little Walter had been ill, and it was necessary to get away in the first vessel they could, and there was little choice."

"Where from, my dear."

"From Burmah; and they wished to go to Madras first."

"Go on where Mama was tired out, and slept soundly," said Daisy.

Miss Treherne read,— "I suppose this prevented my being roused by the even unusual shouting and din that had been going on. At length I became aware that it meant something more than common. You can hardly imagine my feelings, when the stewardess rushed by saying she believed there was a fire, but they hoped to get it under. Passengers were not to stir. I dressed, and put on poor little Walter's clothes while he was half asleep, and then

packed all the valuables I could into a bag that I could carry, and tried to wait patiently. Oh! Ella, the hours it seemed, in that noise and roaring and shouting, some of the passengers trying to struggle on deck, and others holding them back. I could hardly stir from poor little Walter's berth, for at times he woke up terribly frightened. The vessel began to roll, and I heard confused shouts about the spars and rigging being on fire. Then there was a cry, 'Put out the boats!' and from my port window I thought I saw preparations for letting down a boat. Presently, in the flashes of light, I saw one full of people, who had got off safely. O these awful moments! A fire in the night, and utterly powerless to get away from it. I shouted with all my strength, for I thought we were left behind. I seized Walter and tried to find the stairs, but could not tell the way. On a sudden I heard my name called, and a man with scorched clothes came rushing along, he was searching for us. He snatched a blanket from Walter's cot, and rolled him in it, and shouted, 'Come! come quick! no time to lose,' and dragged me along with him. His hair and dress seemed half burnt. How he dragged me on deck I cannot conceive, but there was the sea, black and dark below, and there was the boat, and above and around was smoke and

blackness and flame. He shouted loudly, 'Catch! catch the child!' and before I had an idea of it, there to my horror was my poor little Walter flying through the air, rolled up in his blanket. I have a vision of men's arms raised, but I saw nothing clearly. He said, 'All safe! now come,' and I believe he got me down nearer to the water, and tied a rope round me, and that somehow I was got into the boat, but I really can remember no more. They told me afterwards it was the mate, who had found out I was left behind, and had come back to save me. He was the last man to leave the vessel, and he very narrowly escaped being carried away at the last moment by the swirl of the waves."

Ella Treherne paused, and one of the children asked, "Is that all, Cousin Ella?"

"Yes, dear, the rest is saying how the letter had been delayed, for she had been too ill since to write."

"No wonder, poor thing!" said Uncle Matthew. "How thankful you must be for these two little girls, my dear young lady!" and then he stroked the little heads before him, adding, "ah! some of those sailors are brave fellows,—fine fellows!"

And then he took up his hat as if to go away, repeating again almost to himself, "brave fellows!"

noble fellows! Ah! if my poor dear Alma had but such a one! Now I must go,—thank you.”

Miss Treherne was still reading her letter, but as he rose, she cried, “Oh! stay, here is another little bit I had not quite made out.”

“In the course of the next day the boats were brought to land, having been taken up by another steamer. The Captain saw us comfortably settled at a hotel in Colombo, which seemed a paradise of rest after all we had gone through. By my request, the mate came to see me and little Walter; I thanked him, you may be sure, and told him that I had written all about him to my husband, and then asked if we could do anything for him, if he had any friends in India or elsewhere. He answered very sadly, he was afraid he had none. He would take no money, and very little thanks; the only thing he seemed to care to have, was a photograph that had been taken of Walter just before we left Burmah. That he seemed to value. When I bid him goodbye, I said I had two children in England, living at ‘Hurst Manor’ in Sussex, whom I should tell how bravely he had saved their mother. He said (with some agitation) ‘There’s a young lady lives thereabouts, it would be a favour to me, madam, if you would let her know this.’ (Her

name was Shirley, or Sherwood. Am I wrong in thinking that was the name of the young lady you had engaged to teach my children? I suppose she may be his sweetheart.) I tried to persuade him to write to his friends himself, but he answered, that he had given them a great deal of trouble he knew, and he had not heard of them for years. I wonder if you will ever hear of him. I had to leave Colombo next day by another steamer, so I did not see him again. His name is John Armstrong."

Miss Treherne and the Vicar looked at each other, and then she put the letter into his hand.

"Why do you look so grave, Cousin Ella? Are'n't you glad he saved Mama?" said one little voice.

"Shouldn't you like to see that sailor? Perhaps he'd show us what Walter was like," said the other.

"Was this the way he threw him, do you think?" said Daisy, rolling up her doll. "Here, catch! catch him!"

And while they were playing, the two older people were talking in grave, serious under tones.

"I can make nothing of it but 'Armstrong,' but yet surely it must be John."

"Perhaps he has taken another name," said Miss Treherne; "but what shall you tell Alma?"

"May I take the letter home? I must be very careful, poor child, not to give her too much hope."

He walked with rather faltering steps up the lane, repeating to himself, "John Armstrong, John Armstrong," where had he heard that name?

Alma met him in the doorway; "Oh! Uncle Matthew, how you have tired yourself in going for me! I'm very sorry."

He made only a short answer, but went into his study and shut the door; then in opening a cupboard and searching among some papers, he took out a set of old diaries of more than twenty years ago. He opened one, and tracing page after page with rather trembling fingers, at length exclaimed, "yes! yes, I was right!"

Dick Sherbrook had enlisted under the name of "Armstrong" when he went out to the Crimea, and John must have adopted his father's name.

CHAPTER XXX.

PAST OR PRESENT ? WHICH IS BEST ?

THEN at the time that letter was written he was alive !

Alma rejoiced as if he was already found, though many links of the chain were still wanting. Mrs. Elliotson did not even tell the name of the burnt vessel, nor of the captain, nor did she know where the mate was gone. And all this had happened several months ago, for the letter had been delayed at an up-country station. But he was alive ; he had done a brave deed, of which she was proud ; he had spoken of his friends with feeling ;—it all seemed like life from the dead to her.

Uncle Matthew could hardly bear to damp her hopes, yet he could not silence Aunt Letty's shake of the head, or the oft-repeated words, " we cannot be too sure, my dear ! " Even Henry Lyon told her it might still take a long time to find him.

And many a consultation was held, and many a letter of enquiry was written, and notices were put into some of the leading papers about him, and answers were received, all ending in the same information, that the name was unknown.

One morning Alma came rather unusually late to breakfast, and after she had helped Uncle Matthew, and attended to Aunt Letty, she hurried to the door to meet the postman. Arranging the letters in her hand as she came, she all on a sudden cried out, "Oh! Uncle Matthew." There was a letter in his own writing, short indeed, but to the purpose.

"Dear Alma,

"I earnestly beg to hear from you, though you may say I don't deserve it. Address John Armstrong, Gunboat, Devonport.

"I have seen advertisement.

"J. S."

Then Alma knew that her brother was a seaman in the Royal Navy.

Not until he had made thorough enquiries would Uncle Matthew have asked him to Ivyton; but the character he received from his officers was excellent, during those months he had served on board the gunboat. Not perhaps until then would John have wished to show himself at Ivyton, but

now he felt he might come with credit. He had leave for a week.

John Sherbrook had gone through a great deal in those years, and now he had come back an altered man. Not that he said so himself, for he was become a man of much fewer words than he used to be. It had been a long up-hill climb, with many slips back, before he could see his way clearly. He had shown courage and daring, but still that dark slur stood against his name, even if others forgot the past, and he felt he could never undo it, *he could never take away his own sin*. Repentance, long and bitter, had followed; not as a passing, though deep emotion, but a real turning to a better life.

After he was lost sight of, when he had rashly engaged himself in an unseaworthy vessel, he left it at the Cape. He fell ill there; a kind woman who visited at the hospital, took compassion on the young sailor, and by her efforts were brought more home to him words and thoughts and teaching he had idly heard long ago, but which now were real to him. Then arose in the young man's mind a yearning longing for those who had so tenderly watched over him before, for the much tried little sister, for that peaceful little Ivyton home, almost the only real home he had ever known, where he

had been so kindly received; even for the admonitions, the prayers, and counsels of the old man.

"Shall I see him much altered, do you think, Mr. Lyon?" asked Alma very anxiously, the evening before John was expected.

"He altered a good deal during the time I was with him, so I should think you must be prepared to see him look different in some ways."

And yet, when Henry Lyon brought him up from the station, and they all went to the door to welcome him, Alma could hardly believe that her brother stood before her. In the strong, broad shouldered man, in a seaman's dress, with a weather beaten face, with many a deep-set line, and a bushy beard, few would have recognized the young man who had left Ivyton six years before. He looked to her so old, so grave, so different, that she almost started from him, and visibly trembled when he stooped down to kiss her, as if he had been under some strange mistake. And then she reproached herself, for a frown and a deep flush passed over his face, as if he was in pain, and he turned from her, to thank Mr. and Mrs. Erle for asking him to come.

"Your sister hardly knows you at first, I can see," said Henry Lyon, really pitying both, though

half amused, "she has thought of you so much as just the same, that she is struck by the fact of your looking somewhat different, but in half an hour she will begin to see who you are."

Alma felt grateful to Henry for saying this, and also to Uncle Matthew for asking him to remain and spend the evening with them.

She felt very shy, and as if she could hardly address a word to the stranger who sat beside her. Was he really John! was that man in a common sailor's dress her brother, or only a pretence? Did he remember, or had he forgotten how he left this place?

Innumerable thoughts crossed her bewildered mind, and she felt quite obliged to Aunt Letty for her trifling remarks, and to the other two for their conversation. The stranger was also very silent and quiet; but he answered questions and remarks that Uncle Matthew made to him, in a tone of respect and deference very unlike his former manner.

When Henry Lyon took leave, John said he would walk a little way with him. Alma was alone in the little dining room, busy upon some small arrangements, when she found him standing before her. She began in rather a hurried way,

"You have been away so long,—do tell me something of what you have been doing,—and where you have been, and why you never told me anything for all that time?"

He stood still and answered, "I might say the same, I have never heard of you."

"Oh! I wrote to the office, and letters came back, and then I didn't know what to think, or where to write. It is now six years since, and I hardly seem to know you," she said, in a tone of distress.

"And now, Alma, I suppose you are ashamed of your brother!" It was said in a very low tone, but it pained her exceedingly.

"O no! no! only you look different."—

"There was nothing for it but to begin at the bottom, and I wanted to come back to England, and to see you once more, and this was the only way. But if you consider me a disgrace I must go back to my ship." He spoke very sadly, and Alma cried out, "O no! don't say that! I only meant that you looked so changed. I've heard a brave story about you, a story I loved,—that is all I have heard. Tell me all about that. Your message through the lady you saved from a fire, was the only way in which we knew how to find you."

"You got that then;" and without saying more he drew out a little packet, and laid before her the likeness of a merry, happy boy, with long curling hair, and placed a letter in her hand. It was the one from Mrs. Elliotson, thanking gratefully the brave man, who at the risk of his life, had saved her and her child. "These must speak for me," he said, "for they are the only valuable things I have."

When Alma enquired more into particulars, he told her the ship was altogether on fire, that after helping the passengers out, he found at the very last moment Mrs. Elliotson had been missed. "I couldn't leave a woman and child to be burnt, you know, and happily they did just escape; the vessel went down head foremost a very few minutes later!"

Alma covered her eyes with her hands, feeling with thankfulness what a merciful escape it had been.

"He was such a beautiful little fellow; he had been playing with me on deck only the day before, and I should think it would have broken his mother's heart to lose him."

Ah! there she recognized John's old fondness for children, and here again was a little child helping to lead in the right way! Alma took up

the letter and the photograph, saying, "Let us bring it into the other room to show them," and put her arm within her brother's.

She spent the time a great deal out of doors with him, and in those beautiful summer days, and there on the quiet of the downs, the old relation between them by degrees returned, and in an unconnected manner he told her of his life during those years. Then the days seemed to go only too quickly, and the end of that week was coming very close before she could realize that it was begun.

John was very quiet and silent most of the time, and it was a new surprise to her to find him one morning reading before she came down. "Do you ever have books on board ship?" she asked.

"O yes, we can have them; there is a library for the men."

"But do they ever read?"

"Some do, and some do not; and then sometimes the officers will lend you books. I've been studying a few that were lent me; mathematical ones, and on the steam engine."

How pleased Uncle Matthew was to hear this, and still more so when he could lead the young man into a conversation about the different places

he had visited. Even though his voice often sounded as if it had been used to shout in a gale of wind, it was evident that his mind and his whole nature had grown, morally. There was also confidential talk between the two, and although Uncle Matthew said but little, Alma hoped he was satisfied; and when on the Sunday all little Ivyton saw the old Parson walk up to church with his hand on a young sailor's arm, though they wondered and did not understand, they were sure it must be all right, since the Parson did so.

John did not care much to talk of the past, he told Alma he knew he had destroyed poor Lyon's prospects in life, and that nothing had ever shocked him more; in a sort of despair in feeling he had broken himself off from his last friend, he determined he would bring no more trouble and disgrace on his friends, which led to his prolonged silence, and his change of name. If I can do no good they shall hear no harm, he thought; quite overlooking the fact, that he was bringing deep suffering on others as well as on himself. It was after his misery at Cape Town that he fully realized this. Then at length, "I will arise and go to my Father," became not mere words, but a living reality,—and a better and a more manly life had begun in John Sherbrook.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MASTER CASTLE SPEAKS HIS MIND.

THE last day he would spend at Ivyton, by his own wish they went down to the shore. Henry Lyon drove them to the nearest village, in Annette's little pony cart, and then they descended the steep shingly ridge. A soft blue sea lay before them, full and large in the July sunshine, with gentle ripples of waves falling with measured sound on the sandy beach.

Under those white towering cliffs the three walked on together, but when they came within sight of the cavern, John said he would rather go on alone. Often in the solitary watch, and amongst very different scenes, had a confused remembrance of that terrible night come across him, and he wished to revisit the place. Alma watched him climb up the steps to the doorway,

and then he disappeared inside. She sat down on the beach to wait for him.

"You have not told me yet what you think of him," said Henry.

Alma started, and presently answered, "I hardly know ; he is so different, and the time is so different, and so short, it all seems so unreal,—and to-morrow he will be gone."

"But you don't object to the change in him?"

"O no ! but I don't seem to know him yet to be the same."

"He is *not* the same, and that I think is the difference that strikes you. But what does Mr. Erle think of him, has he seen much of John?"

"Uncle Matthew seems very well satisfied with him, partly from talking with him alone, and also from his quietness and his desire to read and improve himself. Uncle Matthew has given him a few handbooks on various subjects, to take back with him, and that has pleased John very much. Then he talks of sending some of his pay when he gets a little more."

"That is well, if he will but do it. Do you know what he said to me last night? That he had no idea till he was at the other side of the world, that anyone could be such friends as they have been."

Alma looked pleased, and yet the thought would return that "she did not know him." They waited long, and at length John came out; he looked very pale and walked behind them, signing to them to go on before. Alma was sitting on the beach talking to Castle, when her brother joined them.

The old man had been telling of some hair-breadth escape of his youth.

"I always wonder how one should feel at such a time," said Alma. "How do you feel, Castle?"

"Well! I can answer for one, you don't mostly feel nohows not at all. But many and many's the time, Miss Alma, as I've walked up and down here since I was an old man, and I've took off my hat," (which he did now) "and thanked the Almighty for the things He's brought me through when a boy. And a great many more could say that too, I've no doubt."

"I hope so too, Castle."

(Who was that great big fellow thought Castle, with a red carnation in the corner of his mouth, who had flung himself on the beach almost at his little lady's feet, and was idly throwing pebbles into the sea? To be sure, there was young Mr. Lyon to learn him manners.) So Castle, standing loyally beside his little lady, and being in a talkative mood, went on,

"There's a power more done for sailors than when I was a boy, and they tell me, the ladies are at the head of it. But there's a deal in a sea life to teach a man, Miss Alma, if he will but learn it. Let alone the discipline, which is a fine thing in itself for a man, and the wonderful sights you see, there are things no book learning will ever teach you; when you feel how awful is the power of the wind and the sea, and how little you are with all your cleverness, and how many a time you've got other folks lives in your hands to care for, let alone your own. Awful queer 'tis! but it's a fine teaching, and brings many a thing home to your mind as would never else be there."

"You're speaking pretty much the truth there, to my mind, old chap," said the big seaman to Castle, with a nod of his head.

"Most men of my years might say so mate, but have you seen much service, eh?"

"Pretty well for that matter; I'd my ship burnt almost under me not so long ago;" and the tall man walked up to Castle, and looked fixedly at him.

"Indeed, sir! then you've reason to say as I do. What port are you from? I don't know you, though you seem to know me."

There was a momentary pause,—and then Castle

saw his little lady rush up, and put her arm into that of the big man, exclaiming, "I don't wonder you don't know him, Castle, but it's my brother John, just come back to us. I didn't know him a bit at first, so no wonder you should not."

Castle uttered a vehement exclamation of surprise. "What! Mr. John? the young gentleman that we got out of the Parson's Cave?"

The seaman nodded in assent.

"Then I can tell you young man, you've a something to be thankful for in the very beginning, for never a mortal man did I know come out of that 'ere place alive! But where have you been, sir, all this time? we almost gave you up for lost, we didn't know what was become of you."

No answer came, but the red carnation twisted about in the sailor's mouth, and his face flushed scarlet.

"Why, how's this, sir! I looked to see you in an officer's uniform, and pretty high up in the service, but instead of that, I'm afraid"—

"There, Castle! that will do, old fellow!" interposed Henry Lyon.

But Castle, for once, was not to be stopped, but standing like a solid little tower, with his large telescope under his arm, and looking up at the tall seaman, he went on, with a prolonged shake of his

head, "Ah! I'm afraid I see how 'tis. Lost your topmasts more than once, and altogether out o'gear! *We* don't like to see a young gentleman come down to that. Nor to know he's not been heard of for so long; it don't look well."

"Oh! but Castle! he's come back to us now, and he has brought home an excellent character. And he saved a lady and her child from a dreadful fire on board his vessel, in such a brave way,—the mother of the little girls I teach, and so I know all about it from her." And then with glowing cheeks and kindling eyes, her two hands clasped on her brother's arm, the girl told the story of the brave deed.

"That's right! my little lady," exclaimed Castle, "say all the good you can for him, and stand by him to the last. I'm right down glad to hear it. You see, sir! what good friends you have still,—(more than you deserve). A sailor is always the better for having some one on shore to care for him, whether it's man, woman, or child,—it's a *somebody*. But I can tell you it cuts cruel hard when he don't let them know if he's alive or dead for so long."

"Oh! Castle, he won't do so again, he came home as soon as he could to find us."

The tall seaman stood silently before the old

man, his eyes were cast down, and the red carnation twisted about rapidly in his mouth, while the beads of sweat burst out on his forehead.

"There now! see what 'tis to have a young lady plead for you, sir;—a deal more than you deserve. Why, if you were good for anything, you'd take her for your flag ship, and you wouldn't go far wrong to follow her lead; for to my mind the little *Lady Alma* is a right down good 'un."

"O! Castle," exclaimed the girl, half laughing and half crying.

"Well done, old boy! we'll get you to lead the cheers for the *Lady Alma*," said Henry.

The eyes of the brother and sister met, and Alma still clinging to his arm, caught a glance from John so full of affection and of such deep gratitude, while he murmured, "I'm quite of that mind too, old fellow!"

"Well, sir! I'm sure I don't wish you no harm, and I hope you may live to do many a brave thing. You *stick to it*,—listen to the advice of an old fellow like me,—*obey your orders*,—follow your little flag ship there,—and,—*read your Bible*," he added, in a reverent tone, "and if I'm not much mistook, there's the making of a good officer in you yet. God bless you, sir!" and he wrung heartily the outstretched hand.

They walked past the coastguard station. A young fisherman was standing at the door, with a child in his arms. All on a sudden he burst out with an exclamation, "Becca! Becca, I say! come out quick, for if here been't Big Jack his self, the fellow that picked me up;" and then he made a dash after the party, with his child still in his arms, and was vehemently shaking hands, while Becca came up more slowly to see what her husband was after. A radiant glow of pleasure spread over the tall sailor's face, as he said, "O yes! I see; and very glad I was to pick you out of the water that morning; it would have been awkward if another yacht had gone over you."

"Here's my wife mate, come to thank you too—"

"Oh! Becca," exclaimed Alma, "how glad I am that my brother should save your husband! Do you see who it is?"

Becca was quite astonished and confused. "You've got him back miss, oh! how glad I am," and then she stammered out her grateful thanks to 'Mr. John,' who answered, "One is always glad to save a fellow, besides I owed you a good turn, Becca. Is that your little girl?"

"Yes sir," said Jack, "a'int she a jolly 'un?" while little Susie bent forward a shining little round head, and put out her little fat hand, and

pointed a tiny forefinger at the big man, calling out, "dar! man!"

"She's doing her best to thank you herself, sir, and to say she wouldn't like to have lost her father; would you, ducky?"

Then the child showed some other pretty and funny ways, till she made every body laugh and look happy around her.

The two parties separated, for Jack and Becca had to return to their home, after spending the afternoon with their friends at the Gap. As Alma went home over the downs, she felt what a different brother she now had from the one who had so often walked over them with her six years before.

It was altogether a happy evening. Annette Wray had been asked to join them at the Vicarage at tea; she was the only person who had from the beginning recognized the stranger, but with her usual quiet and delicacy, she had waited until Alma should make him known to her. They met at the door; when John put out his hand as if to an old friend. "O! Mr. John, how pleased I am to see you, and to know that your sister has got you back safely!"

"And I am glad to have the opportunity of thanking you, Miss Wray, not only for your kindness to Alma, but for your good care of—of—a fellow like me, of which she was talking to me only yesterday.

Annette was much moved, and said very gravely, "O, sir! I was only thankful to do what I could for your sister, and all in that sad trouble everybody was in."

"Well, you have been a good friend to Alma all these years, and I hear you take excellent care of my friend Lyon as well."

Annette looked gratified; it was the same true simple heart as ever.

"Come here, Alma, for a moment," called Uncle Matthew, and then put something into her hand. "Take it to him, my child! he has won it back again." Then Alma put the chain of her father's watch round his neck, and felt as if she was giving him a decoration of honour.

Late that evening she missed John, and going to seek him, she heard low voices in the garden. Henry Lyon and John were conversing in under tones together, and she turned back again, not wishing to interrupt them. The only words she heard were, "I destroyed your life for you; I must trust to Alma to repair that harm for me, as she has done so much besides."

There were thankful hearts under the same roof that night; the girl felt that week had given her, even under a strange exterior, more of a brother than she had ever had in her life; the old Parson said to his wife, "Letty, he is more of a man and of a gentleman than I had ever hoped to see him, and I do trust one may say of him, poor lad,—
"he was lost, and is found!"

And the sailor felt he had now a home on shore, to which his heart might turn on many a distant voyage.

The next morning he was gone from Ivyton. Alma walked down the lane with him to the Strawberry Gardens, where he went in to see the little Elliotsons, and to show them once more how Mr. Armstrong had thrown Walter into the boat. This reminded him of a thing he had meant to do,—taking the photograph of the child and Mrs. Elliotson's letter he said,—"*Here Alma! keep these for me, and if I never come back, think of me by them. It is the best thing I ever did in my life!*"

And as he bade her farewell very affectionately, he begged her to forgive him all the sorrow he had caused her, adding, "*if I never return, there's*

a good fellow at home, who will do more for you than I ever could have done."

The next moment Alma watched him from the gate, walking rapidly away to the station. He waved his cap at the last turn of the lane, as she had seen him do when going off to school. His ship was going to the Mediterranean for five years.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CALM AFTER STORMS.

“ Now Molly, I want to ask you to do me a great favour,” said Annette Wray, one day in the early spring.

“ What may that be, miss ? ”

“ Well Molly, there are some of your beautiful white campanulas and your dark blue larkspurs are coming up in the walk of your little garden ; may I take up a good bunch of them ? ”

The old woman laughed. “ Is that all, Miss Annette ? You can have ’em and welcome, but whatever should you want ’em for ? You’ve plenty on ’em up at the Farm.”

“ But I’ve a particular fancy for these, Molly,” said Annette gravely, but with a half hidden smile.

“ And what’s that ’ticular fancy mean, I wonder ! You don’t use to come begging to an old woman like me, in general.”

"Well, Molly, I want to make a new garden, and a *very* nice one for a young gentleman, and that's why I'm come begging to you."

"Oh! Oh! Miss Annette," said Molly, with a grim smile, "and who may that be?"

"Well, haven't you heard that we are going to lose Mr. Lyon from the farm, and everybody is very sorry, for they are all so fond of him, only he isn't going very far away."

"Where to, miss?"

"You know, Molly, Sir Richard has been buying a good deal more land about here, and as it is more than my father cares to look after alone, Sir Richard suggested that he should keep Mr. Lyon as a sort of partner, and they should farm the land together. So Mr. Lyon will go to live at the little house which was once old Crook's, about half a mile away."

"Hey! I suppose that's why I heard he was a building two new rooms at old Shepherd Crook's, isn't it?"

"Yes, Molly, and very pretty little rooms they are, with two bay windows, one with a little peep from the downs to the distant sea, the other looking inland. It's so nice, and so I want to make him a pretty garden."

"So Mr. Lyon be going then? Next thing he'll

do will be to want a wife," said Molly, with a little sly wink.

"I daresay," said Annette, in a very quiet tone.

"Then 'twont be losing Mr. Lyon only," said the old woman, rather sadly.

"But it won't be going so very far off you see, Molly."

"But I shall miss the sight of you terrible, Miss Annette, nigh on every day."

"The sight of *me*, Molly; why do you say that?" For Annette thought the old woman was a little deaf, and had made a mistake.

"Why! if you marry Mr. Lyon, o'course then——"

"My dear Molly! you make quite a mistake. Besides I feel more like Mr. Lyon's grandmother than his wife."

"Not quite that, Miss Annette, though you be older," said Molly, with a grim smile; "besides some young farmers like a 'sperienced wife."

"Please don't put that into Mr. Lyon's head, Molly, for I'm sure it isn't there," said Annette, with a quiet under laugh, "and you see, I should have to tell him I had my hands so full at the farm, that I couldn't leave it to please him even; so you see you haven't got rid of me yet," she said, gently patting the old lady on the shoulder.

"Well! there ain't nobody else for Mr. Lyon, unless 'twas little Miss Alma."

"Really Molly, I think Mr. Lyon *must* settle that for himself."

And after all, Mr. Lyon had settled that question for himself, and although to everyone else it seemed the most natural thing in the world, it came upon the girl with a sweet and joyous surprise, that the friend who had been such a comforter and support in the years of her continued anxiety about John, whom she in her turn had tried to soothe and comfort under a great deprivation and disappointment, should ask her to be his wife. As for him, he had gone on loving her for years, first in her trouble with John, then as he saw her relation to Aunt Letty and Uncle Matthew, and lastly towards himself. But not until he had some means of making a living did he tell Alma how he had been drawing closer to her for so many years,—and then in a few minutes he took her in straight to where Uncle Matthew sat writing in his study, and the old man bent down and kissed the sweet face, and laid his hands on the dear little head, and blessed his darling fervently. It was no surprise to him, he had seen it coming on for a long time, and even when Alma hung back from the idea of leaving him, it

was his wish that the marriage should be as soon as possible.

It was a bright day at Ivyton, when the little old church was decked, and a troop of girls with Esther Davies at their head stood with baskets of flowers, and all the village was so pleased that their old Parson should marry this little girl of whom they had grown so fond, to that manly upright young fellow whom everybody respected.

And if a bride wants her friends, Alma had her's gathered round her; first of all the dear good Annette, and Miss Treherne; Becca too, whose history had been so often connected with her own; the little Elliotsons, and Annette's young sisters. Old Master Castle, too, was there, by special invitation, having trudged up from the shore, delighted to see his little lady married; and if old Molly was not there, still she knew all about it from Mrs. Erle, who did not forget to tell her over and over again, that "there was nobody to give the bride away, but Sir Richard Treherne himself!"

Alma's new home was little larger than a cottage, built of split flints, and with a gabled roof; but creeping plants trained over the walls would

soon make it look pretty. Miss Treherne had taken pleasure in having it suitably furnished, and that was her bridal present. There were but two luxuries for which Alma wished, one, a comfortable chair to be always ready for Uncle Matthew whenever he should look in at them, and a low seat for Aunt Letty, beside the fire, when she came to tea. A few of her own best paintings formed the decoration of the room. Some more books had found their way out of Uncle Matthew's shelves, but this time for a happier purpose, to form the beginning of Alma's library. Standing upon a slope of open down, the cottage had only a few trees round it; but the garden so carefully laid out by Annette, and enclosed by a little white fence, made it look already very homelike. A few farm buildings stood at a little distance, and looking away across the bare down, beyond the patches of gorse, now lying dark in the twilight, or gleaming golden in the sunshine, came the dip and the gleam of blue sea that Alma loved. And now, ten days after the marriage, after a happy, short visit to Henry's mother and sister, the young people were spending a day or two at the Vicarage, before moving to the Cottage.

They had walked out on the downs, and were

sitting for a few minutes at Alma's favourite point, where the smooth green hollow is curved into the hill side, ending in the rich view below. She had been talking to Henry of the beginning of her life at Ivyton, and how Uncle Matthew had brought her to that beautiful spot in the first early days ; how she had often and often sat there since, with such a variety of feelings, and now—so happy. Those days came indeed across her mind, days full of their anxieties truly, but she knew now more fully all she had received, all the love with which the orphan girl had been surrounded,—the friendship which Annette had so freely bestowed upon her,—all Miss Treherne's goodness to her,—the kindnesses shown to her by the rough, simple country people,—but most of all the tender love of those who had received her into their own home : how she had been sheltered, and what consideration had been shown her, and also extended to her brother ! “ As I think of what I was in those times,” said she, “ I feel I must have given them a great deal of trouble and anxiety, perhaps to Aunt Letty especially. I know she always wanted to make me good, but as for dear Uncle Matthew, his patience and goodness never failed. And whatever you think worth having in me, Henry, you must feel you owe it all to him, for he has taught me the best I know.”

"I may say something of the same, with regard to myself," said he, "and I had no sort of claim upon their kindness."

"Oh! but Uncle Matthew always liked you from the first, and Aunt Letty too."

"They were indeed always kind to me, but that is not exactly what I mean. I think he helped me more than anyone, (except a certain little personage who is nameless,) to accept what might otherwise have been a great misfortune to me."

The little personage looked very much pleased, and laid her hand in his, saying, "How do you mean, dear?"

"Not only by his kindness and sympathy, but by strengthening in me the principle of looking to my duty before my happiness, and reminding me that in my duty in time I should find my blessing, and so my happiness."

"Yes. How like Uncle Matthew that is! But you don't regret the change of life now, dear, I hope?"

"I feel always I should have liked the sea life the best on the whole, but I'm too well off to think much about that now," said he, laughing.

"And I, who am so much happier than I ever dreamed of being as a girl;—oh! so happy, and I don't deserve it a bit."

“Then why does my silly little wife cry?” said he playfully, as in spite of her words, two large tears stood in Alma’s eyes.

“My poor John!” murmured she.

“Yes indeed! I wish he could have been here; but I do think, Alma, his last letters were in every way the most satisfactory we have had, and with some spirit and happiness.”

“And he will be thinking of us.”

“Yes; and he did think of us before you knew; for that last evening he told me he looked to you as the one to repair the life he had injured.”

Strangely enough, Alma had never before connected this meaning with the words she had overheard in the garden.

Uncle Matthew had come in from a long and wearisome day, and entered the little parlour where his wife sat alone. “Where are our young people?” he said.

“Oh! they are gone out for a long walk; but you look so weary Matthew, do stay and rest. So it’s really come to their last day, and how I shall miss Alma, even such a little way off!” And so she went on remarking the things and ways in which she should miss Alma the most, while her husband from time to time answered, “Yes, O yes!

of course you will, Letty, but happily she is not going far away ; the child can run in at any time in the day you want her, and she has arranged to do so many of the same things for us ; it is not like parting with her to a distance."

And yet, while he spoke cheerfully, he was all the while feeling how much their home would have lost to-morrow,—without that sweet young face to see everywhere, or to hear the light footstep on the stairs, and the bright joyous laugh that to him was music, and to miss all those tender little ministrations that had grown so dear to him,—everything in short that made up herself.

He lay on the sofa quite silent for a while, and all on a sudden said, " Letty ! it has come to an end, and let us be thankful it has come this way. I think there is no doubt she will be *very* happy. He is such an excellent fellow, so good and true, and so affectionate, I feel as if we should gain a son, and have two children instead of one. Now I must go to meet them."

" There he is looking for us ! " said Henry, as a gray figure seemed approaching them, in the twilight.

" Now, my children, isn't it time to make your way back ? Annette is coming to tea, and she and Aunt Letty will be waiting for us."

Alma slipped her arm into his, and sent Henry round to the other side, and then said gaily, "Now, Uncle Matthew, do tell Henry the story you once told me here, of the two children who were lost."

"What was that?"

"Oh! some thirty years ago, I was walking home over this part of the down, rather late one evening. I knew my way well enough, but a fog was thickly coming on, and I was in consequence hurrying homewards, straight on, for when once you are in doubt and come to a stand, it is easy enough to lose your bearings. All on a sudden I heard, 'Master! master! man! we can't find our way! master, please!' and two little voices were crying after me. I could not see them at first, but by following their voices found them presently, crouched under a furze bush. The poor little things were going home to a shepherd's house, and had wandered a little out of the way, and were sitting crying and bewildered."

"And what did you do with them, sir?"

"I took up a very tiny girl in my arms, where I think she fell fast asleep, and made the boy take hold of me, but as I attempted to go, I found myself also rather puzzled, and that I could not find my way. I kept walking from one furze bush

to another, but without apparently getting any further on. I knew it was necessary to be careful, for there was the edge of a chalkpit somewhere near about, and one might easily have made a false step over its brink, so that I really was in some perplexity."

"And how ever did you get on at last?" asked Henry.

"I went feeling with my stick before me, sometimes struck by the ludicrous description people would give of the Parson of Ivyton lost on the downs so near his home, and dragging along two children with him. At length I thought I heard footsteps behind me, and then a sheep coughed, and presently I heard them nibbling around me. I was pretty well acquainted with the ways of the sheep in those times, and I knew they were going by a particular round to where the turnips were thrown out for them, that they always went above the chalk pit, and had never fallen down it,—so I followed up closely among them, and then came out on a track I knew well, from which I easily took the children home."

"That was a very good way, I shall remember that if I get lost in a fog on the downs when I am out farming."

(Alma was thinking how these were not the only children that Uncle Matthew had brought

home through the mists and fogs since that day).

"I suppose you must know the downs under all aspects as well as most people," remarked Henry.

"Well, yes, I think I do; and not always so peaceful and lovely as they are to-night. I remember once seeing a party come up here, some walking and some in carriages (those young persons of whom I have so often told you, Alma,) intending to go down to the Gap, to see the magnificent waves which the wind was driving inland. But the gale had risen so fearfully, and the blasts rushed with such force over the top of the down, that the drivers were quite alarmed lest their carriages should be blown over, and refused to go on. So they were obliged to give up their proposed excursion, and the ladies all got out, while the carriages were turned to descend the hill. The wind was so violent, that I saw a gentleman take some of the ladies, and put them, crouched down, under the shelter of the furze bushes, for fear they should be knocked down."

"That must have looked rather comical," said Alma, laughing, "but how disappointed they must have been to turn back."

"Some of the young men walked on to the sea, which must indeed have been grand. The whole down looked swept flat and grey, the shingle was

tossed up to the cliff with the spray, and the foam balls were driving for miles over the inland country like thistle down."

"It must indeed have been grand."

"Yes; who would ever think in such a storm and turmoil, that such a lovely evening as this could exist; peace and calm, with the distant headlands and capes resting on a purple sea, and the sails sleeping as if no such thing as a tempest had ever been heard of. Thank God for the calms of the sea,—and of life!" he said, in an under tone.

"O, Uncle Matthew! do say to us the lines you once made about 'Storm and Calm.'"

"You know it very well, my dear child," said he, laughing.

"But do say it to Henry, he does not."

Then in a deep musical voice, he repeated,—

The sand and spray across the sward are driven,
Striking our faces in the bitter blast,
And white with foam, their crests all tossed and riven,
The giant rollers on the shore are cast.

The beach is driven into a shelving wall,
By rush and sweep, with deafening, grinding tones,
And in each breaker's measured, thundering fall,
High up against the cliff are flung the stones.

The sea breaks inland with a stormy flood,
And drift and seaweed over meadows sweep,
And where the fisher's humble cottage stood
Is now known only by a mounded heap.

Ah ! who can think when storms are breaking loud,
And all the day is dark with grief and pain,
That there is Light enough to pierce that cloud,
Or that Life's joys can ever rise again.

The tides again retire, the winds are hushed,
The sea lies smiling under summer skies,
And from those buried stones and ruins crushed,
The tender blade shall spring, the blossom rise.

The sands of Time their soothing touch may shed
Over our broken lives, our bitter tears ;
And consecrate the landmarks of the dead
With tenderest memories, hallowed by the years.

Even the wrecks and weakness of our age,
Sweet opening buds and flowers may yet adorn,
If in the annals of another page,
Are told the names of children yet unborn.

The sunset glory deepens in the west,
With softest hues of light, and gleams of gold,
And life's dark evening may be richly blest
With ties of love to bind the young and old.

Linked with the hope the faces lost to find,
And those dear pilgrims once again to greet,
When Storm, and Pain, and Death are left behind
Beyond the Sea of Glass, spread at Our Father's feet.

And very dear and beautiful did those two
young faces look to the old man, as he walked
home between them.

“ Here, my dear,” said Aunt Letty, “ Annette
has brought you two letters from town, and I do
believe one is from John.”

Alma opened the indifferent looking letter first, and put it into Henry's hands. It contained a kind note from Lady Anstey about Alma's marriage, with a most acceptable present of £100.

The other was a long letter from John, wishing them both joy, describing the places he had visited, and writing with great interest of his gunnery practice.

When Henry next looked round, Alma was kneeling down beside Aunt Letty, reading her some comical passages out of John's letter, at which the usually grave face was smiling with amusement and pleasure.

His eyes lingered fondly on the picture.

The next day the young people moved to their new home on the downs.

As Alma, with eyes half glistening with a tear, yet a face radiant with happiness, leant back from the little pony cart where she sat beside Henry, to wave her farewells to the two well-loved figures standing in the doorway, the old Parson with his hand on his wife's shoulder, remarked, "Ah! my Letty, let us thank God for the day when we took the child to our home and to our hearts."

